



UNIVERSITY OF CENTRAL ASIA
GRADUATE SCHOOL OF DEVELOPMENT
Institute of Public Policy and Administration

International Labour Migration in the Context of the Eurasian Economic Union: Issues and Challenges of Kyrgyz Migrants in Russia

Lira Sagynbekova



WORKING PAPER NO.39, 2017



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Abstract:

Integration of the Kyrgyz Republic into the Eurasian Economic Union (EAEU) and the resulting socioeconomic impacts are amongst contemporary Kyrgyzstan's most acute and hotly debated topics. This paper is focused on international labour migration and describes the situation of Kyrgyz labour migrants in light of their new legal status in Russia. The objective of this work is to provide a deeper and more holistic understanding of the contemporary issues and challenges confronted by Kyrgyz migrant workers in Russia. Specific consideration is extended to an analysis of the impact of the recent Russian economic crisis on Kyrgyz labour migration, and the mitigating role played by the EAEU for Kyrgyz workers. This paper also highlights the importance for Kyrgyz labour migrants to educate themselves about their new legal rights in relation to Kyrgyzstan's Accession Status in the EAEU, and more generally the need for further study on the evolving socioeconomic realities of Kyrgyz labour migrants abroad.

Keywords: Labour migration, Eurasian Economic Union, Kyrgyzstan, remittances, economic crisis, integration, Central Asia, Russia.

JEL codes: F15, F22, J61

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ABBREVIATIONS

| | |
|---------|--|
| CIS | Commonwealth of Independent States |
| EAEU | Eurasian Economic Union |
| EAK | Evraziiskii Analiticheskii Klub (Eurasian Analytical Club) |
| EU | European Union |
| EurAsEC | Eurasian Economic Community |
| FMS | Federal Migration Service |
| GDP | Gross Domestic Product |
| INN | Identifikatsionnyi nomer nalogoplatel’shchika (Taxpayer identification number) |
| KGS | Kyrgyzstani Som (the currency of the Kyrgyz Republic) |
| MIA | Ministry of Internal Affairs |
| WTO | World Trade Organization |

1. INTRODUCTION

In August 2015 Kyrgyzstan became a full member of Eurasian Economic Union (EAEU), and this changed the status of its international migrants. Labour migration is critically important in Kyrgyzstan because of multiple crises that the country faced since the collapse of the Soviet Union. After the dissolution of the Soviet Union and during the transition to a market economy, several economic crises have limited the capacity of the Kyrgyz domestic labour market. This has resulted in difficulty maintaining sustainable livelihoods, which has led to high volumes of Kyrgyz workers seeking employment and better wages abroad. The collapse of complex economic ties between the former Soviet republics was a significant cause of negative economic impacts and increases in regional unemployment.¹ Furthermore, “[...] decade-long economic recession and job losses estimated in millions contributed to the dramatic deterioration of labour-market conditions in all resource-poor countries in the CIS [Commonwealth of Independent States] zone.”² Labour migration from Kyrgyzstan increased significantly at the end of the 1990s and intensified further at the beginning of the 21st century.³ According to the 2015 Analytical Report by the Ministry of Labour, Migration and Youth of the Kyrgyz Republic, between 600,000 and 700,000 Kyrgyz citizens work abroad, with the majority (516,893)⁴ of labour migrants living in the Russian Federation.⁵ However, according to other estimates,⁶ up to 1 million of the economically active population of the republic works abroad at the height of seasonal work opportunities.⁷

At the dawn of the 21st century, economic growth in Russia and Kazakhstan, driven by higher oil prices, led to employment opportunities for semi-skilled and professional workers from less developed CIS countries.⁸ The majority of migrants who leave Kyrgyzstan in search of better economic opportunities find jobs in Russia and Kazakhstan.⁹ Today migration is a major contributor to GDP.

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- 1 Thieme, S., ‘Return Migration Coming Home? Patterns and Characteristics of Return Migration in Kyrgyzstan’, *International Migration*, vol. 52, no. 5, 2014, pp. 127-143.
 - 2 Abazov, R., ‘Current Trends in Migration in the Commonwealth of Independent States’, *Human Development Research Paper* 2009/36, August 2009, <http://mpr.ub.uni-muenchen.de/19220/> (accessed November 2013).
 - 3 Sagynbekova, L., *The Impact of International Migration: Process and Contemporary Trends in Kyrgyzstan*, Cham, Switzerland, Springer International Publishers, 2016. See also RSMD and NISI KR, *Vstuplenie Kyrgyzskoi Respubliki v Evraziiskii Ekonomicheskii Soiuz: vliianie na protsessy migratsii*, Moscow, Spetskniga, 2015, <http://russiancouncil.ru/common/upload/WP-Kyrgyzstan-26-Rus.pdf>, (accessed March 2016).
 - 4 This number includes different categories of migrants including migrants’ families.
 - 5 MLMY KR, *Analiticheskii otchet o deiatel’nosti Ministerstva Truda, Migratsii i Molodezhi Kyrgyzskoi Respubliki za 9 mesiatsev 2015 goda*, Bishkek, MLMY KR, 2015, p. 7.
 - 6 Sarygulov, B. A., *Sovremennaiia situatsiia i aktual’nye problemy trudovoi migratsii v Kyrgyzskoi Respublike i alternativny perspektiv ee regulirovaniia*, Department of Migration Service under the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Kyrgyz Republic (DMSMFA KR), Bishkek, DMSMFA KR, 2005; DMSMFA KR, *Informatsiia o trudovoi migratsii Kyrgyzskoi Respubliki*, Bishkek, DMSMFA KR, 2005; Rueegg, M., *The Effects of Labour Migration on Rural Development in Kyrgyzstan. Assessment of the Current Rural Workers Emigration and its Consequences for Helvetas Interventions*, Bishkek, Helvetas, http://www.majarueegg.com/Archivos/Speeches/ImpactsLabour-Migration_oct08.pdf, (accessed May 2012); EDB CIS, *Labour Migration and Human Capital of Kyrgyzstan: Impact of the Customs Union*, Saint Petersburg, 2013.
 - 7 Work opportunities for labour migrants are relatively high during spring and summer seasons. See also Sagynbekova (2016).
 - 8 See Tishkov et al. (2005), Abazov (2009) and Sagynbekova (2016).
 - 9 Thieme (2014).

In 2014, remittances accounted for 30.3% of Kyrgyzstan's GDP, making it the world's second most remittance dependent economy after Tajikistan, where remittances formed 36.6% of GDP. The World Bank estimated that in 2015 Kyrgyzstan received US\$1.7 billion in remittances.¹⁰ Approximately, 80% of Kyrgyz migrant workers send remittances to their families in Kyrgyzstan¹¹ (an average of US\$200 per month).¹² However, the share of remittances in the GDP of Kyrgyzstan decreased to 25.7% in 2015 as a consequence of the economic crisis.¹³

Regional post-Soviet socio-economic changes have impacted greatly on labour migration trends and systems. Historical ties, transport connections, cultural interlinkages, mutual agreements, economic dependency and intensive migration exchange between many post-Soviet states have contributed to the formation and functioning of a CIS migration system¹⁴. Additionally, Kyrgyzstan's accession to the Eurasian Economic Union (EAEU) in 2015 exerted its own influence on migration processes. EAEU membership provided added impetus to the flow of Kyrgyz migrant workers to Russia and Kazakhstan: between January of 2015 and 2016, the number of Kyrgyz migrant workers in Russia increased by about 50,000. By contrast, Central Asian countries without EAEU Accession Status experienced decreases in migrant numbers in Russia.¹⁵ To some extent, the devaluation of the Russian currency in 2015 resulted in decreases of migrant workers from Tajikistan and Uzbekistan.

Due to complicated and costly legalisation procedures, as well as economic, social and legal insecurities, many labour migrants in Russia have experienced difficulties. A considerable number of Kyrgyz migrants staying in Russia pinned their hopes on the country's accession to the Eurasian Economic Union and expected improvements to migrants' situations in Russia.

Kyrgyzstan's full-membership of EAEU in August 2015 resulted in various simplifications for labour migrants. For instance, the duration of temporary residence in EAEU member states without official registration was extended to 30 days;¹⁶ obtaining work permits and patents¹⁷ in EAEU states is no longer required; labour market quotas have been abolished; and access to social benefits (public health care, education) is the same as that provided to citizens of the host country with the exception of pensions. These and other changes resulting from EAEU membership have impacted labour migrants in Russia in a number of ways.

10 World Bank Group, 'Migration and Remittances: Recent Developments and Outlook', *Migration and Development Brief 26*, April 2016, <http://siteresources.worldbank.org/INTPROSPECTS/Resources/334934-1288990760745/MigrationandDevelopmentBrief23.pdf>, (accessed April 2016).

11 Kroeger, A. and Anderson, K., 'Remittances and Children's Capabilities: New Evidence from Kyrgyzstan, 2005-2008', *Discussion Papers 1170*, 14 October, Berlin, DIW, 2011, pp. 7. http://www.diw.de/documents/publikationen/73/diw_01.c.388327.de/dp1170.pdf, (accessed March 2014).

12 Sagynbekova (2016).

13 World Bank, *Personal Remittances, Received (% of GDP)*, <http://data.worldbank.org/indicator/BX.TRF.PWKR.DT.GD.ZS?end=2015&locations=KG&start=1993&view=chart> (accessed July 2016).

14 See Wolfel (2002); Ivakhnyuk (2006, 2007); Sadovskaya (2006) and Abazov (2009).

15 SPK, *Kyrgyzstan v EAES: polgoda v soiuze*, chast' II, February, 2016, <http://spk.kg/kyrgyzstan-v-eaes-polgoda-v-soiuz-chast-ii/>, (accessed March 2016).

16 For Kyrgyz citizens migrating to Russia this period was 3 working days until 25 March 2011 and increased to 7 working days thereafter. For those who went to Kazakhstan, it was 5 days.

17 Patent is a type of work permission, before 2015 it was required for labour migrants who worked in the private sector and since 2015 it is required as a work permit for all type of jobs but only for labour migrants from visa-free with Russia countries.

Given this situation, the following questions are relevant: How have migration and migrants' situations changed since the accession of Kyrgyzstan to the Eurasian Economic Union? Were migrants' expectations justified? What kinds of challenges do migrants still face in their current work place away from Kyrgyzstan? The purpose of this paper is to analyze labour migration in the context of Eurasian Economic Union and contribute to a better understanding of challenges and issues of Kyrgyz migrants in Russia. Special attention is also paid to the analysis of the impact of the economic crisis in Russia on labour migration and the role of Eurasian Economic Union in its mitigation.

Overall, how migrants have been impacted by the EAEU is the focus of this research, which is a question that has not been studied in any detail to date. The information presented here is based on research conducted amongst Kyrgyz labour migrants residing in Moscow.

2. KYRGYZSTAN'S INTEGRATION INTO THE EURASIAN ECONOMIC UNION (EAEU)

The Eurasian Economic Union is an international organization of regional economic integration which currently includes Russia, Kazakhstan, Belorussia, Armenia and Kyrgyzstan.

On 29 May 2014, the presidents of Russia, Kazakhstan and Belorussia signed the treaty for the establishment of the EAEU. This treaty came into force on 1 January 2015. On 2 January 2015, Armenia joined the union. Kyrgyzstan's accession to the Eurasian Economic Union was approved by the Kyrgyz Government in December 2014, the Agreement was signed 8 May 2015 and full membership of the Union was achieved 12 August 2015.

The EAEU represents a common market of 182.7 million people¹⁸ with a combined GDP of US\$1.6 trillion.¹⁹ As Roza Sarbaeva from the Eurasian Research Center stated, "The Eurasian Economic Union is the most significant integration project that laid the foundation for the development of all integration processes in the post-Soviet space, the establishment of the EurAsEC, the Customs Union, and the Single Economic Space."²⁰ The Eurasian Economic Union was preceded by the Eurasian Economic Community (EurAsEc)²¹ and Customs Union²². The Eurasian Economic Community (EurAsEC) ceased to exist and was replaced by Eurasian Economic Union. In 2015, Kyrgyzstan's GDP was US\$6.6 billion. Russia with a GDP of US\$1,325 billion for the same period is the dominant force of the Union.²³

18 EEK, *O demograficheskoi situatsii v Evraziiskom Ekonomicheskome Soiuze*, EEK, 2016a, http://eec.eaeunion.org/ru/act/integr_i_makroec/dep_stat/econstat/Documents/expressdemogr201512.pdf, (accessed April 2016).

19 This GDP is calculated for 2015. EEK, *Ob osnovnykh sotsial'no-ekonomicheskikh pokazateliakh Evraziiskogo Ekonomicheskogo Soiuza*, EEK, 2016b, http://eec.eaeunion.org/ru/act/integr_i_makroec/dep_stat/econstat/Documents/Indicators201601.pdf, (accessed April 2016).

20 Sarbaeva, R., 'On the Way to Eurasian Economic Union: Issues, Opinions and Prospects of its Development', *G-Global*, 3 June 2015, <http://group-global.org/ru/publication/24057-way-eurasian-economic-unionissues-opinions-and-prospects-its-development>, (accessed April 2016).

21 The Eurasian Economic Community was established as a regional organization in 2000 and existed until 2014. A members of this organizations were Belorussia, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan and Russia (Uzbekistan joined the organization between 2006 and 2008)

22 The Customs Union was formed between Russia, Belorussia and Kazakhstan in 2010.

23 EEK (2016b).

The European Union (EU) served as the model of regional integration for the EAEU.²⁴ The main objective of the Eurasian Economic Union is to shape conditions for the freedom of movement of goods, capital, services, and people.²⁵ Similar to the European Union (EU) the EAEU common market includes the freedom of movement of labour resources. Based upon the EU model, some Western European economists have argued that, “By fostering growth through a more efficient allocation of labor between countries with labor surpluses and those with labor shortages, the free movement of labor would most likely create higher economic welfare.”²⁶ Additionally, labour mobility can have a positive effect on respective demographic conditions (e.g. population decline).²⁷

The last principle of the EAEU serves as a key element for migration processes within the Union. International migration to and from Kyrgyzstan has mainly been within post-Soviet states. For instance, between 1991 and 2009, 89% of emigrants went to post-Soviet countries and 99% of immigrants moved to Kyrgyzstan from the same region.²⁸ Moreover, 86% of Kyrgyz labour migrants carry work in Russia or Kazakhstan.²⁹

Labour market experts have emphasized the importance of free labour mobility for “overall economic welfare, economic integration and society.”³⁰ Other scholars stress that the processes involved in establishing a unified labour migration system in a single labour market can give rise to specific social problems such as socioeconomic inequality and inter-ethnic tensions.³¹

Nonetheless, laws and administrative arrangements promoting economic integration are critical in facilitating labour migration. Since labour migration to Russia and Kazakhstan plays an important role in livelihoods, especially in the case of the rural population, facilitating migration was a key reason motivating Kyrgyzstan’s accession to the EAEU.

Before Accession Status was acquired, many Kyrgyz labour migrants faced difficulties associated with the legal processes and administrative procedures in Russia. Applying for registration and obtaining working permits were complicated and expensive. In seeking EAEU Accession Status the Kyrgyz government hoped this would resolve many issues faced by undocumented labour migrants, and provide more open and efficient access to employment opportunities and social welfare (e.g. healthcare, education and housing). The majority of Kyrgyz migrants working in Russia and Kazakhstan, many of whom did not have their work papers in order, supported integration into the EAEU because it offered the prospects of le-

24 Sarbaeva (2015).

25 RSMD and NISI KR (2015).

26 Krause et al., ‘How Far Away Is a Single European Labor Market?’, *IZA Discussion Paper*, no. 8383, August 2014; Zimmermann, K. F., ‘European Labour Mobility: Challenges and Potentials’, *De Economist*, vol. 153, no. 4, December 2015, pp. 425-450.

27 Krause et al. (2014).

28 Sagynbekova (2016).

29 MLMY KR (2015).

30 Krause et al. (2014).

31 Yudina et al., ‘The Eurasian Economic Union: Migration Risks’, *Mediterranean Journal of Social Sciences*, vol. 6, no. 4, July 2015, pp.451-457.

galizing their status and avoid the stress of persistent documentation checks by police and agents of the Federal Migration Service (FMS), offer the possibilities of better employment opportunities and conditions, and improve access to public health care and education for all family members. Another important reason for Kyrgyz migrants' advocacy for Accession Status was the prospect of participating in the EAEU's joint pension system.³²

3. METHODOLOGY

Empirical research was carried out in Moscow in February 2016. Moscow was selected because it is the most attractive city for Kyrgyz labour migrants. According to data obtained from the State Service for Migration under the Government of the Kyrgyz Republic (dated 15 September 2015), 32% of Kyrgyz migrants in Russia worked in the city of Moscow; 44% in Moscow oblast as a whole (including the city).³³ This concentration is the result of socio-economic factors, namely Moscow's higher income compared to other regions of Russia (the average cash income per person is nearly four times higher)³⁴, better opportunities for employment (especially in the service sector), the deterioration of the demographic situation (i.e. connected to population decline and demand for additional labour) and development of migrants' networks.³⁵

A semi-structured questionnaire survey was conducted in Moscow based on a snowball sampling method that involved 50 Kyrgyz labour migrants, and in-depth interviews were carried out with key informants.³⁶ The main objective of the questionnaire survey was to investigate labour migration issues within the EAEU, and specific issues and challenges Kyrgyz labour migrants experience following the new Accession Status conditions.

The questionnaire survey and in-depth interviews with labour migrants were conducted in their apartments, at their work place, or in a café. Three groups were interviewed: 1) Labour migrants who came to Russia before Kyrgyzstan's accession to the Eurasian Economic Union and have been working in Moscow for a long time; 2) Labour migrants who arrived in Moscow after Accession Status to the EAEU but who had lived/worked in Russia before; 3) New migrants who recently arrived in Moscow. This categorization helps in understanding the migration experience from different angles. Additionally, interviews were conducted with migration experts in Moscow and Bishkek, the capital of Kyrgyzstan. The collection and amalgamation of secondary data was undertaken in Kyrgyzstan at the offices of the State Service for Migration and the National Statistical Committee.

32 Eurasian Research Institute, 'Kyrgyzstan's Accession to the Eurasian Economic Union: Labour Migrants Case', *Weekly e-bulletin*, no. 20, http://www.ayu.edu.tr/static/aae_haftalik/aae_bulten_en_20.pdf, (accessed March 2016).

33 State Service for Migration under the Government of the Kyrgyz Republic, *Dannye po grazhdanam Kyrgyzskoi Respubliki, osushestvliaiushchikh trudovuiu deiatel'nost' na territorii Rossiiskoi Federatsii na 15.09.2015g*, (accessed March 2016).

34 KMSNPGM, GUGM 'MIDTS', MOEO, *Mnenie moskvichei o migratsionnoi situatsii, deiatel'nosti pravitel'stva Moskvy i organov ispolnitel'noi vlasti vsekh urovnei po ee operativnomu regulirovaniu*, Moscow, Palitra Plus, 2007, p. 30.

35 Sagynbekova (2016).

36 Kyrgyz labour migrants with whom I had contact helped to access others. The selection of key informants was mainly based on duration of migration, migration experience and willingness to share with information

4. PROFILE OF INTERVIEWED MIGRANTS IN MOSCOW

The age of migrants interviewed in Moscow varied from 18 to 45 years old. The average age was 30. Almost 80% were natives of the southern regions of Kyrgyzstan and 58% were male. The average number of people in a migrant's household in Kyrgyzstan was six people. The majority of migrants interviewed had secondary education, and 36% had completed higher education. A considerable number of the labour migrants with tertiary education from Kyrgyzstan were educated to be economists³⁷, teachers, and lawyers.

Prior to finding employment in Russia, some Kyrgyz labour migrants had worked in both private and public sectors of the economy including civil engineering, telecommunications, trade and education. At that time, their average monthly wage was 8,768 KGS (US\$119).³⁸ In addition, 41% of migrants had additional income, mainly from agriculture and livestock farming. Among those interviewed, 18% were unemployed, 6% were university undergraduates, and 10% were high school students prior to going to Russia. Regarding the family unit, 64% of those interviewed were married and 4% were divorced. In Moscow, the majority of the Kyrgyz labour migrants were living with one or two family members. Others shared accommodation with compatriots.

This information infers that mainly young employable people, though not necessarily single or male workers, migrate to Russia in search of employment. The majority of labour migrants left their families at home, and in cases where both spouses worked abroad, their children often remained in the care of grandparents or other relatives in Kyrgyzstan.

5. IMPACT OF ACCESSION TO THE EURASIAN ECONOMIC UNION ON LABOUR MIGRATION

5.1. Dynamics of Labour Migration

Prior to gaining the Accession Status to the EAEU, Kyrgyz migration experts and government officials predicted varied scenarios for the dynamics of Kyrgyz labour migration. For example, A. Asanbaev, the Deputy Chairman of the former Ministry of Labour, Migration and Youth believed that relaxation of restrictions on labour migrants and the simplification of employment procedures would result in an outflow of employable people and decrease the working-age population of Kyrgyzstan.³⁹

However, the recent economic crisis and the devaluation of the Russian and Kazakh currencies resulted in a decrease in Kyrgyz labour migration. Whereas in January 2014 some 560,000 Kyrgyz citizens resided in Russia by January 2015 the number dropped to 502,000.

37 Economics programmes at universities do not produce technical economists. Rather, they are a combination of some economics and business courses.

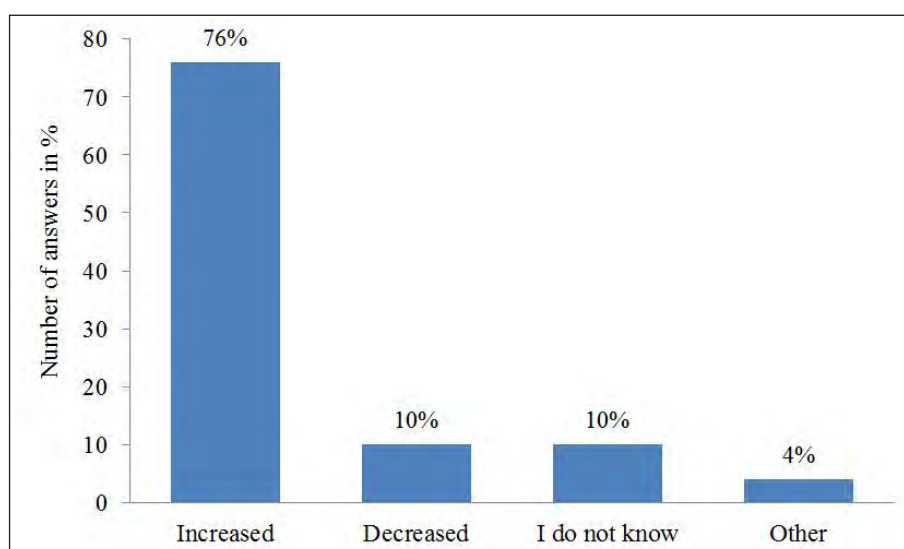
38 US\$1 was equal to 73.9 Kyrgyz som, the National Bank of the Kyrgyz Republic, exchange rate for 1.03.2016, <http://www.nbkr.kg/index1.jsp>

39 Bengard, A. 'Almaz Asanbaev: Poslableniia dlia migrantov privedut k vozmozhnomu ottoku trudosposobnogo naseleniia iz KR', *News-agency '24.kg'*, 10 August 2015, http://24.kg/obschestvo/17450_almaz_asanbaev_poslableniya_dlya_migrantov_privedut_k_vozmozhnomu_ottoku_trudosposobnogo_naseleniya_iz_kr/, (accessed May 2016).

However, with Accession Status, by the end of February 2016, the number increased to over 550,000.⁴⁰

Our survey of migrants in Moscow showed that the majority of respondents felt that the number of labour migrants from Kyrgyzstan since its integration to the EAEU has increased and only 10% of respondents thought there was a decrease in the number of migrants (Figure 1).

Figure 1: Perception of interviewed migrants about the number of labour migrants. (Responses to the question: 'Has the number of Kyrgyz labour migrants increased or decreased since accession of Kyrgyz Republic to the EAEU?')



Source: Author's survey 2016, n=50

Respondents related the increase in the number of labour migrants with the abolishment of work permits and patents, improved employment opportunities and conditions, and the ability to save more money because of these changes. High unemployment and low incomes continued to drive people to migrate.

It is likely that the increase was caused by socioeconomic difficulties and few opportunities for improving livelihoods in the place of origin, as well as the cancellation of permit documents and simplification of employment procedure for migrants in Russia. Migration inflows in the European Union are driven by similar factors: higher average income, existence of a considerable number of one's own migrant community in place of destination, relaxed immigration policies of foreign governments, and easier access to foreign labour market opportunities.⁴¹

Respondents who noted that the number of migrants decreased felt this was due to the economic crisis, decrease of salaries, difficulties with employment, and blacklisting.

40 SPK (2016).

41 Krause et al. (2014); Marques (2010); Palmer and Pytlikova (2013).

“The number of migrants decreased because after the accession of Kyrgyzstan to the EAEU, many illegal migrants entered the black list” (43-year-old female labour migrant from the Kyrgyz province of Jalal-Abad – Recorded in Moscow, 14 February 2016).

It should be mentioned that at the beginning of 2015, 194,000 Kyrgyz citizens were on black-lists for Russian Federation immigration violations. At the end of October 2015, some 76,000 Kyrgyz citizens were excluded from these lists.⁴² According to the Border Service of Russia in March 2016, 119,065 Kyrgyz citizens were blacklisted⁴³.

5.2. Reasons for Labour Migration

Labour migration is primarily driven by socioeconomic factors, the most important being protracted unemployment (especially in rural and depressed urban areas); stagnant and low wages; deprivation and poverty; and very limited potential for improvements in lifestyle and livelihoods (see Table 1).

Table 1: What was the reason of your migration to Russia?

| Reason | Migrants' responses in % |
|--------------------------|--------------------------|
| Low wages | 34 |
| Unemployment | 20 |
| To earn money | 18 |
| Poverty of the household | 8 |
| Accession to EAEU | 6 |
| Credit and loans | 2 |
| Family circumstances | 2 |
| Other | 10 |
| Total | 100 |

Source: Author's survey 2016, n=50

Wage differentials between Kyrgyzstan and Russia or Kazakhstan make migration attractive.⁴⁴ Before moving to Russia, the average monthly wage of those interviewed was US\$119 (8,768 KGS equivalent) whereas in Russia they were earning 32,400 rubles (US\$416) per month.⁴⁵ An earlier study (Sagynbekova 2016) found that between 2000 and 2011 the average monthly wage in Russia was three to five times higher than in Kyrgyzstan.⁴⁶ In 2015 the

42 Data obtained from interview with Deputy Chairman of the State Service for Migration under the Government of the Kyrgyz Republic A. Asanbaev on 09.02.2016.

43 Data provided by the State Service for Migration under the Government of the Kyrgyz Republic in May 2016.

44 Interview with A. Asanbaev on 09.02.2016.

45 Author's survey 2016; US\$1 was equal to 77.8 rubles, Central Bank of the Russian Federation exchange rate for 16.02.2016, http://www.cbr.ru/eng/currency_base/daily.aspx?date_req=16.02.2016.

46 Sagynbekova (2016).

average monthly wage in Kyrgyzstan was 13,277 KGS (US\$218)⁴⁷ whereas in Russia it was 34,030 rubles (US\$577).⁴⁸

Experts' estimates show that the level of unemployment in Kyrgyzstan varies from 9% to 12%.⁴⁹ However, according to the National Statistical Committee of Kyrgyzstan, the official unemployment figure is 8%; with the highest rate of unemployment being observed among youths between 15-19 years of age (17.7% of the total).⁵⁰ Moreover, 21% are underemployed people working up to 20 hours per week.⁵¹

Survey results showed that a considerable number of the Kyrgyz labour migrants in Russia were there to earn higher incomes for specific purposes such as prospective marriage, improvement of material status, or to increase savings to start their own business.

Poverty and a decline in living standards also serve as important reasons for labour migration. It should be noted that in 2015, 32.1% of Kyrgyzstan's population was classified as poor, a 1.5% increase over the previous year.⁵² Poverty, lack of employment opportunities, insecure livelihoods, and the motivation to support families by finding a job abroad are some of the main driving forces of labour migration.⁵³

The Moscow survey demonstrated that 90% of those interviewed were sending remittances home to families on a regular basis. These remittances varied from 2,000 to 40,000 rubles (US\$26 to 514) per month. The families spent these funds on basic consumption needs (e.g. food and clothing) as well as for real estate investments, home appliance acquisitions, the purchase of farming equipment and livestock, and cars. They also spent remittances to pay debts (e.g. bank loan), education of children, health care, and family events (e.g. weddings).⁵⁴

Findings of this study also showed that EAEU membership's impact on the decision of people to migrate is somewhat complex. According to the respondents, this includes factors related both to the labour migrants' place of origin and destination (push and pull effects). In the context of place of origin, this included negative impacts on agribusiness (drop in prices for agricultural products and difficulties with product sales) and trade decline in wholesale and

47 NSC KR, *Informatsionnyi biulleten' Kyrgyzskoi Respubliki po prodovol'stvennoi bezopasnosti i bednosti*, 4/2015, Bishkek, NSC KR, 2016, p. 21; US\$1 was equal to 61 KGS, National Bank of the Kyrgyz Republic exchange rate for 1.07.2015. <http://www.nbkr.kg/index1.jsp> (accessed July 2016).

48 RFFSSS, *Srednemesiachnaia nominal'naia nachislennaia zarabotnaia plata rabotnikov v tselom po ekonomike Rossiiskoi Federatsii v 1991-2016gg*, 2016, http://www.gks.ru/wps/wcm/connect/rosstat_main/rosstat/ru/statistics/wages/, (accessed July 2016); US\$1 was equal to 59 rubles, The Central Bank of the Russian Federation, exchange rate for 31.07.2015. http://www.cbr.ru/eng/currency_base/daily.aspx?date_req=31.07.2015 (accessed July 2016)

49 RSMD and NISI KR (2015).

50 NSC KR, *Sotsial'nye tendentsii Kyrgyzskoi Respubliki*, Bishkek, NSC KR, 2015, pp. 64-65.

51 NSC KR, *Zaniatost' i bezrobotitsa*, Bishkek, NSC KR, 2016b, p. 18.

52 NSC KR, *Uroven' bednosti naseleniia Kyrgyzskoi Respubliki*, <http://www.stat.kg/ru/news/sostoyalas-press-konferenciya-po-itogam-socialno-ekonomicheskogorazvitiya-respubliki/>, (accessed July 2016).

53 Schmidt, M. and Sagynbekova L., 'Migration Past and Present: Changing Patterns in Kyrgyzstan', *Central Asian Survey*, vol. 27, no. 2, 2008, pp. 111-127

54 Author's survey 2016.

retail markets like *Dordoi*. In the context of destination, this included factors such as the abolishment of work permits and patents and the improvements via the Accession Status (e.g. simplifications for EAEU member countries in getting a job). For example, a young couple from Bishkek was influenced by EAEU impacts and came to Moscow in search of a job. During the interview one spouse expressed:

The Eurasian Economic Union impacted my migration to Russia. Prior to arriving to Moscow, I worked in an Internet shop in Bishkek and imported goods from China. Prices for goods increased⁵⁵ and the number of customers decreased. Hence, my salary and sales income decreased, and I decided to come to Russia. The EAEU also impacted my husband's job. He was engaged in the trade of cars from Germany and Latvia. The customs duty increased and it became not profitable to pursue this business anymore. These factors impacted the decision to migrate to Russia, since you do not need permission documents for work." (A female labour migrant from Bishkek - Recorded in Moscow, 14 February 2016).

Impacts of the Eurasian Economic Union on the economy of Kyrgyzstan on the one hand, and freedom of movement of people within EAEU countries on the other hand, affect labour migration from Kyrgyzstan. Economic benefits of the integration process are offset by negative economic impacts. One of the obvious negative impacts can be seen in the increase of customs duty and prices for goods imported from China. Prior to accession to the EAEU, a number of Chinese consumer goods were being imported to Kyrgyzstan and then re-exported to Russia, Kazakhstan, and other countries under favourable conditions for Kyrgyz entrepreneurs. After accession to the EAEU, Kyrgyzstan accepted the new trade regime, which in turn contradicts the country's commitments to the World Trade Organization (WTO). Integration into the EAEU common market has resulted in an increase in wholesale and retail prices of non-EAEU imports; ending the simplified import regime (mainly from China).⁵⁶ Consequently, profitable businesses of some entrepreneurs and merchants went into decline and they had to embark on alternative livelihood strategies including labour migration.

Dependable community networks play a major role in facilitating labour migration. Thus, more than 70% of those interviewed stated that they chose to migrate to Russia because of pre-existing networks there. About 10% reported that joining the EAEU made movement and employment much easier for them. Some 6% remarked that they went to Russia to be with family members. Labour migrant networks play a significant role in finding accommodation, employment opportunities, and essential local information (e.g. public transport). In general, these networks provide various assistance sources for new arrivals.⁵⁷ The common language greatly benefits the Kyrgyz labour migrants who prefer to speak Kyrgyz or cannot speak Russian.

55 It should be mentioned that prices for goods importing from China has also increased due to the devaluation of the Kyrgyz som against the Chinese yuan.

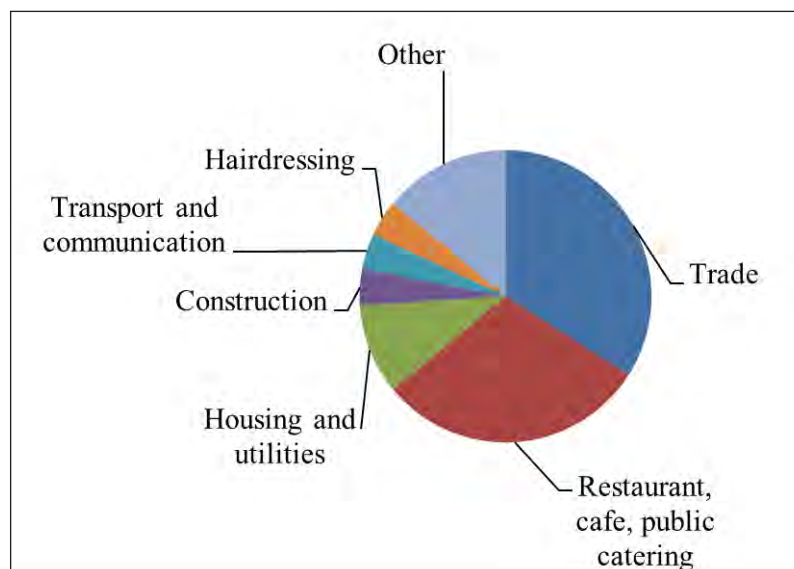
56 Mogilevskii, R., 'Kyrgyzstan's Participation in Global and Regional Trade Agreements: 'Spaghetti in the Bowl' is Perplexed More than Ever', Presentation, *University of Central Asia*, 31 March 2016. See also Mogilevskii et al., 'Kyrgyzstan's Accession to the EAEU: Measuring Economy-Wide Impacts and Uncertainties', *Life in Kyrgyzstan Conference*, Bishkek, 1-2 October 2015, www.likconference2015.org/uploads/5/7/8/7/57877941/james_thrulow_eaeu_impacts_kgz.pdf.

57 Detailed discussions of this issue can be found in Sagynbekova (2016).

5.3. Economic Activities of Labour Migrants

The majority of the interviewed Kyrgyz labour migrants in Moscow were employed in the trade and service sectors of the economy (Figure 2). The position of migrants varied from manager and technician to unskilled worker. However, half of the interviewed migrants worked in unskilled jobs.

Figure 2: Economic activities of interviewed labour migrants in Moscow



Source: Author's survey 2016, n=50

Diaspora networks were an invaluable resource for finding employment. For example, 77% of those interviewed found jobs through their respective networks and 60% were in this respect by their immediate family or broader circle of relatives. Friends, fellow Kyrgyz nationals and flat mates were also helpful in providing information about job vacancies.

At the time of the interviews, the average monthly earnings of the labour migrants were 32,400 rubles (US\$416). The highest remuneration reported was in the case of a Kyrgyz trader who was earning 100,000 rubles (US\$1,285) per month.

The accession of Kyrgyzstan to the EAEU has brought about certain changes to labour activities of migrants. According to Abdygany Shakirov, Director of Kyrgyz Birimdigi (an interregional public organization), ease of securing employment contracts allowing a migrant to work for more than one year has facilitated integration into the EAEU labour markets. He also noted that accession improved the occupational mobility of migrants: "...if many of our migrants earlier [prior to accession to EAEU] worked as yardman, cleaners and now we can see our citizens in a good jobs particularly, not only working the cash register of supermarkets and hypermarkets, but also managing departments. Many work in the banking sector."⁵⁸

As noted by Almaz Asanbeav, Deputy Chairman of the Kyrgyz State Service for Migration,

58 A. Shakirov interviewed in Moscow, 18.02.2016.

labour migrants are moving from low-paid employment to higher incomes, although this depends on their individual professional attributes and ability to integrate in an effective manner.⁵⁹ However, labour migrants interviewed for this research offered a different perspective. For example, while some identified the positive effects of the EAEU others offered a less optimistic view. Simplified procedures and higher incomes were listed as positive effects by 8% of the sample and 12% indicated that no changes to employment emerged through the simplification of the procedures and that finding employment remained difficult. The following responses of respondents show the mixed reactions:

“It became better; migrants can get any jobs without permission documents... Before, you could not get a job without a work permit, but even if you got a job, it paid a very low salary. It was difficult to get a job. (36-year-old female labour migrant from the Kyrgyz province of Naryn – Recorded in Moscow, 14 February 2016).

Another respondent stated:

It makes things easier that migrants do not pay for a patent, but the notion that you can get any job is just empty words (35-year-old male labour migrant from the Kyrgyz province of Osh – Recorded in Moscow, 14 February 2016).

Many respondents also claimed that Russian employers extend a preference for Russian workers. One recently arrived Kyrgyz labour migrant observed:

“I inquired concerning the position of seller in a boutique, but the employer rudely answered that Russian citizenship is required.” (Female migrant from Bishkek – Recorded in Moscow, 14 February 2016).

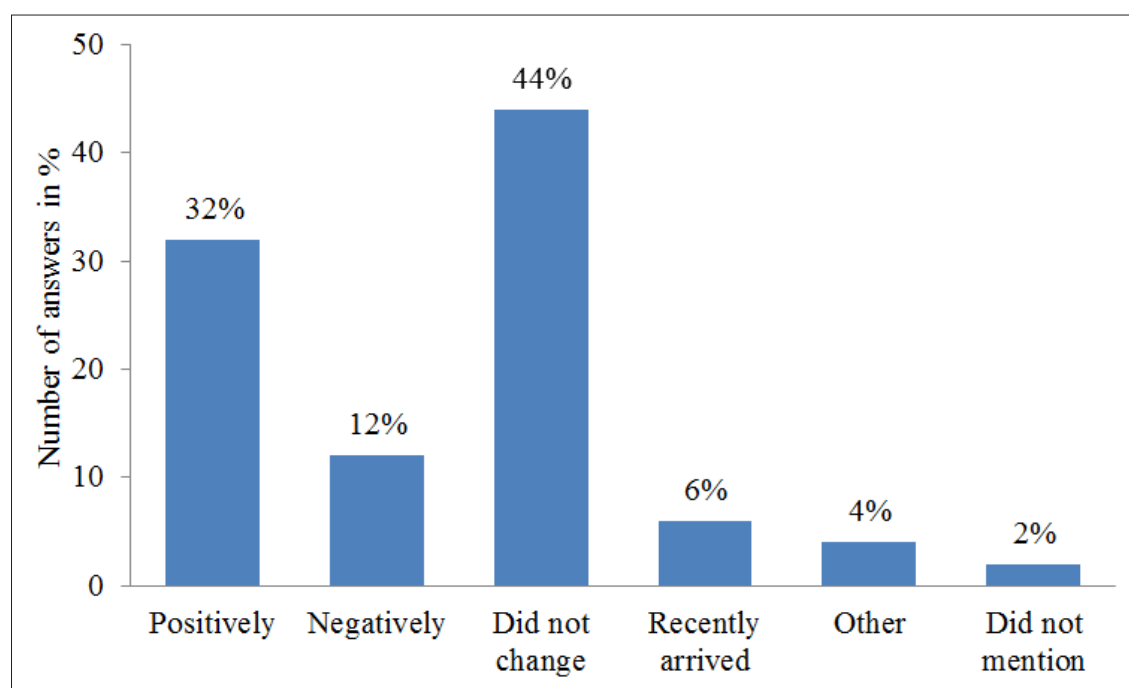
The survey showed that the majority of the Kyrgyz labour migrants recognized improvements in the legal procedures but emphasized that there remain certain unresolved issues associated with attaining employment. Added to this are the negative impacts of the current Russian economic crisis.

5.4. Impact of the EAEU Integration Process on Migration: Evolving Issues and Challenges

The integration of Kyrgyzstan into the Eurasian Economic Union has brought many changes to the situation of Kyrgyz labour migrants in Russia. For some of them the situation has improved, but for some the situation has worsened: Figure 3 below illustrates the percentages of the perceptions and their types. At the same time, during the survey in Moscow, 44% of interviewed migrants indicated that their situation has not changed, especially since almost half of them obtained Russian citizenship.

59 Deputy Chairman of the State Service for Migration under the Government of the Kyrgyz Republic interviewed 09.02.2016.

Figure 3: Labour migrants' responses regarding their situation in Russia (Survey question: How has your migration situation and life in Russia changed since accession of Kyrgyzstan to the EAEU?)



Source: Author's survey 2016 (n=50)

Migrants who indicated that their situation had improved refer mainly to simpler procedures and to reduced costs for securing necessary documents to access benefits. For example, in 2011, before accession, Kyrgyz labour migrants paid about 16,000 rubles (US\$516) for a Russian work permit (*razreshenie na rabotu*) and 4,000 rubles (US\$129) for a patent,⁶⁰ and by 2013 the cost of a Russian work permit increased to around 30,000 rubles (US\$909).⁶¹ These prices were mainly driven by intermediary individuals and companies who provided these services on the “black market.”

Prior to accession, Kyrgyz labour migrants also expressed concerns about other negative aspects of living and working in Russia such as the abuse of power by Russian policing authorities. As one labour migrant stated:

“Before accession to the EAEU, police often detained people and took money, even if your documents were correct. But now when they see a Kyrgyz passport they do not check so thoroughly and they let you go.” (36-year-old labour migrant from the Kyrgyz Naryn oblast – Recorded in Moscow, 14 February 2016).

Overall, responses from Kyrgyz labour migrants demonstrated the following positive changes:

- Simplification of registration and obtaining employment without permission documents

60 Sagynbekova (2016).

61 AKIpress, ‘Vo skol’ko kyrgyzstantsu oboidetsia v Rossii poluchenie razresheniia na vremennoe prozhivanie, razreshenie na rabotu i priobretenie patenta?’, <http://kg.akipress.org/news:590341>, date of online publication: 11 January 2014, (accessed January 2014).

- Simplified access and acquisition of medical treatment and insurance
- Decrease in the level of interference by the Russian police
- Savings as a result of a cancellation of fees for employment documents
- The abolition of examinations testing the language competence of migrants, knowledge of Russian history and the legal procedures as a condition of entering the country
- Enhanced employment opportunities

For some migrants the significant increase in number of Kyrgyz people moving to Russia increased competition for jobs, which in turn depressed wages, conditions, and job security.⁶² The labour migrants expressing apprehension about this emphasized their concern about possible intensified residential registration checks by Russian authorities and the potential for deportation. According to some Western European economists, the "...potential drawbacks of increased labour mobility in the receiving countries are increased competition that puts downward pressure on wages as well as the threat of welfare migration."⁶³

In terms of residential arrangements, migrants face difficulties in obtaining registration papers from landlords because they cannot afford the fees and payments for public utility services. Another fragility is that many of the Kyrgyz migrants rent accommodation illegally, housing more people than is allowed in a single domicile in order to lower overall living expenses. Despite the extended period allowed for temporary residence in Russia (up to 30 days), many Kyrgyz labour migrants report that they cannot easily register at a dwelling for temporary residence. They depend on questionable private agencies and services that accommodate this need. As a result mismatches between official registration documents and actual place of residence often lead to imposed penalties.⁶⁴

Accession addressed and resolved certain issues for Kyrgyz migrants, especially those associated with Russian immigration laws. There were also gains from the cancellation of pre-entry examinations and freedom of movement for imports brought by Kyrgyz labour migrants wishing to sell produce in Russia (e.g. agricultural goods). Nevertheless, many issues remain unresolved for Kyrgyz labour migrants in Russia. For example, many employers prefer to avoid bureaucratic procedures to cut costs and Russian employers know there is no shortage of Kyrgyz migrants looking for employment. It is therefore easy for employers to take advantage of cheap and readily available labour resources with relative impunity,⁶⁵ and as a result some migrants end up on blacklists and are deported, forfeiting their income and sometimes being unable to reunite with family remaining in Russia.⁶⁶

62 Since many Kyrgyz migrants work in the trade and service sectors in Moscow, and often find jobs through their social networks, an increase in the number of migrants also increases competition within a finite job market.

63 Krause et al. (2014).

64 Detailed discussion of this issue can be found in Reeves, M., 'Clean Fake: Authenticating Documents and Persons in Migrant Moscow', *American Ethnologist*, vol. 40, no. 3, 2013, pp. 508-524.

65 As labour migrants cannot remain in Russia indefinitely without official registration, some employers choose to not abide by their responsibility to legalize the status of their employees. This results in violations of Russian immigration laws, for both employer and employee, however the primary burden falls on migrant labourers.

66 Interview with director of the Interregional Public Association of Kyrgyz people "Ala-Too," Ms Jamilya Begieva, in Moscow, 18 February 2016.

Although many of the migrants interviewed in Moscow stated they saw positive aspects from the accession status, they were also aware of negative effects on their families in Kyrgyzstan as a result of increasing commodity prices and decreasing agribusiness revenues (which constitute a major source of domestic income in Kyrgyzstan) following accession. This gave added impetus to the outflow of Kyrgyz workers to Russia. One interviewee articulated the dilemma this way:

“There are many losses for Kyrgyzstan: increase of customs duty⁶⁷ and respective prices for goods; employable youth came to Russia and mainly unemployable people remained in Kyrgyzstan, but those who came do not work well here cannot find a good job and good earnings.” (Female labour migrant from Bishkek – Recorded in Moscow, 13 February 2016).

The survey also paid particular attention to women and children. Some respondents observed that the situation for female labour migrants from Kyrgyzstan varies depending upon profession and language skills. Overall, only 14% of people interviewed indicated the situation of Kyrgyz female migrants in Russia had improved after accession. The majority of respondents mentioned that with the EAEU, the situation of women migrants had not changed, with many still involved in low-paid, unskilled, and sometimes heavy labour jobs. Arguably, such conditions also increase health risks for women and may impact fertility. According to Jamilya Begieva, Director of the Interregional Public Association of Kyrgyz People, many female labour migrants in Russia are facing serious health issues.⁶⁸ Yet, female Kyrgyz workers in Russia still have better employment opportunities as compared to their counterparts from Uzbekistan and Tajikistan.

Concerning the children of Kyrgyz labour migrants in Russia, the main negative impacts revolve around the fact that they often remain in Kyrgyzstan without direct parental guidance or supervision.⁶⁹ The survey found that on average a migrant couple has two children, and 78% of respondents indicated that their children had remained in Kyrgyzstan. Most children remained with grandparents (76%) while some stayed with the remaining parent (12%), with other relatives (8%), or alone (4%).⁷⁰ Kyrgyz migrants often bring their children to Moscow if one or both parents obtain the Russian citizenship, which facilitates access to educational institutions.⁷¹

Almost one third of respondents stated that the situation had not improved since accession for migrants’ children in Russia. For example, many parents still face difficulties with access to public kindergartens and schools, and many children remain at home. A further difficulty arises because many Russian landlords are reticent to lease accommodation to migrants with children. Conversely, a smaller proportion of respondents (18%) indicated they believed that access to public education had improved since accession, largely because of changes in pro-

67 The customs duty for non EAEU goods has increased

68 Interview with director of the Interregional Public Association of Kyrgyz people “Ala-Too,” Ms Jamilya Begieva, in Moscow, 18 February 2016.

69 See R. Abazov (2009); Sagynbekova (2016).

70 Author’s survey 2016.

71 See RSMD and NISI KR (2015); Aleksandrov et al., ‘Deti i roditeli-migranty vo vzaimodeistvii s Rossiiskoi shkoloi’, *Voprosy Obrazovaniia*, no. 1, 2012.

cessing of documents for Kyrgyz migrants' children.⁷² Overall there are fewer problems or challenges when the children of migrants live with parents in Russia as compared to staying with relatives or alone in Kyrgyzstan, where official statistics indicate 471 violations of children's rights in one year alone.⁷³

In the first 20 years since independence in 1991, nearly 300,000 Kyrgyz people obtained Russian citizenship.⁷⁴ A number of previous studies have highlighted that the majority of people seeking Russian citizenship do so in order to avoid extortion and abuse by Russian authorities. Obtaining citizenship can thus help to minimize difficulties in securing work and generally improves the quality of their employment situation (e.g. higher prestige and better paying jobs).⁷⁵ However, with the integration of Kyrgyzstan into the EAEU, the former rationale is less relevant, and this will most likely lead to a decrease in the number of Kyrgyz migrants desiring citizenship. As one of the interviewees stated, "Now we do not need Russian citizenship."⁷⁶ Relatedly, nearly 80% of respondents who had not sought a Russian passport do not desire it.⁷⁷

Accession has generally improved the legal status of migrant workers. Over 70% of people interviewed stated they had not experienced abuse from Russian authorities such as police, agents of Federal Migration Service etc. since accession. This is sharp contrast to the findings of other surveys conducted in 2007 and 2008 in Moscow indicating that nearly half of labour migrants from Kyrgyzstan were exposed to unlawful actions by Russian authorities.⁷⁸ Nevertheless, violations of the fundamental rights of labour migrant's remains an issue, as 26% of respondents claim they are still sometimes mistreated by Russian police officers. Prior to accession, some officers subjected Kyrgyz labour migrants to extortion practices by continuously checking documents. Now that a work permit for Russia is no longer required Russian officers demand to see employment contracts. At the same time, some respondents mentioned an increase of deportation due to improper registration.

"You joined the Eurasian Economic Union and have to live according to the address in your registration, the police said, and deported 4 migrants from our flat, even if we pay 2,000 rubles each month to the district police." (41-year-old female migrant from Kyrgyz Province of Osh – Recorded in Moscow, 19 February 2016).

Unfortunately, the issue of registration and access to inexpensive or social housing remains a difficult issue for the majority of Kyrgyz labour migrants.

72 Author's survey 2016.

73 Interview with director of the Interregional Public Association of Kyrgyz people "Ala-Too" Jamilya Begieva in Moscow, 18.02.2016.

74 Representative Office of the Ministry of Labour, Employment and Migration of the Kyrgyz Republic in Russia, *Trudovye migranty Kyrgyzstana*, (accessed September 2011).

75 Ruget, V. and Usmanalieva, B., 'How Much is Citizenship Worth? The Case of Kyrgyzstani Migrants in Kazakhstan and Russia', *Citizenship Studies*, vol.14, no. 4, 2010, pp. 445-459; Shabolotov, T.T., *Vneshniaia trudovaia migratsiia v Kyrgyzskoi Respublike v kontekste mirovogo migratsionnogo protsessa*, Bishkek, KRSU, 2006.

76 The female labour migrant from Osh province interviewed in Moscow, 18.02.16.

77 Author's survey 2016.

78 Sagynbekova (2016).

Moving into the broader social arena, one of the more disagreeable aspects of the lived reality for Kyrgyz migrants is the xenophobia sometimes expressed towards non-Russians, Central Asian migrants in particular, exemplified by such events as the sporadic protests of native Muscovites “*Moskvichi*” against efforts by local authorities to build dwellings for migrant workers.⁷⁹ In one study by the Russian Academy of Science, Russian public opinion is shown to be evenly split between those who support labour migration within the Eurasian Union and those who oppose it.⁸⁰ An all too common perception according to this study is that large scale migration “leads to a complication of ethno-cultural and ethno-social dispersion, creates a threat to the regional security and...is the cause of rising crime in the country.”⁸¹

This study shows that some of the risks and challenges faced in the past by labour migrants have decreased following accession, including a reduced number of racist attacks as well as more streamlined processes for obtaining registration and employment documents, in turn leading to a decrease in persistent intimidation and ‘verification’ of documents by police and officials of the Federal Migration Service.

The most notable risks associated with Kyrgyz migrant workers revolve around health issues arising from excessively demanding employment with unsafe working conditions, harsh living conditions in crowded flats, and other forms of conspicuous exploitation by some Russian employers. Back home, there also are risks for migrants’ families left behind, including social deprivation of some migrants’ children; increased workloads of elderly parents, women and children; deterioration of family relations; and an increased dependence on remittances as a major source of income for relatives remaining in Kyrgyzstan.

Finally, a lack of information and awareness of rights and opportunities also contributes to the difficulties experienced by migrants. For example, this study found that a large proportion of the Kyrgyz labour migrants in Russia are not aware of the full scope of their rights or the assistance available to all citizens of EAEU member countries. There was especially a dearth of information among interviewees concerning social provisions, medical aid and insurance, and possibilities of finding work according to one’s specialization and qualifications. This lack of awareness has led many migrants to turn to dubious intermediaries for help, who often also demand extortionate payment for their services.

It should be noted that the Eurasian Economic Commission works with foreign embassies and representatives of diasporas to address these and other issues. For example, during a roundtable held in Moscow on 18th February 2016, the Eurasian Economic Commission presented a new booklet on labour regulations and social welfare programmes that citizens of EAEU countries can access based on the example of Kyrgyz workers in Russia.⁸² This informational booklet and other printed or electronic materials are very helpful. Unfortunately, a shortage of such materials and their poor distribution among labour migrants means that

79 Izvestiia, ‘Moskvichi prosiat mera zapretit’ stroit’ obshchezhitiiia dlia migrantov’, *Izvestiia*, 5 December 2013, <http://www.izvestia.ru/news/561886#ixzz2maAUN8xi>, (accessed May 2016). See also RSMD and NISI KR (2015).

80 Study undertaken by the Russian Academy of Sciences cited in Yudina et al. (2015).

81 Yudina et al. (2015).

82 EEK, *Trudovaia deiatel’nost’ i sotsial’noe obespechenie grazhdan Evraziiskogo Ekonomicheskogo Soiuzu v gosudarstvakh-chlenakh*, 2016.

access to reliable information on migrants' rights remains an obstacle to the improvement of their situation today.

6. EFFECTS OF ECONOMIC CRISIS ON LABOUR MIGRATION AND THE ROLE OF THE EURASIAN ECONOMIC UNION IN ITS MITIGATION

The economic crisis in Russia considerably affected migration dynamics in 2014, reducing the number of Kyrgyz migrants by up to 58,000 people. That year the ruble was devalued by 76%. As a consequence, the incomes of Kyrgyz labour migrants decreased, especially for those working in unskilled jobs (commonly, referred to as the “3Ds jobs” – Dirty, Dangerous and Demanding/Difficult). The real wages of people with menial labour jobs (e.g. street cleaners, loaders) declined, and many people returned to Kyrgyzstan. More active measures undertaken by the Ministry of Internal Affairs (MIA) and the Federal Migration Service (FMS) of Russia against migrant labourers accused of violating Russian immigration laws also resulted in a decrease in the number of migrants. Though the number of Kyrgyz labour migrants has increased slightly since the new accession status, numbers are still down by 20,000 compared to the pre-crisis period.⁸³ According to Abdygany Shakirov, many migrants in Russia were unable to find new employment after being laid off because of the ongoing effects of the regional economic crisis, due to closure of enterprises. Many people returned to Kyrgyzstan to wait for things to improve.⁸⁴

The economic crisis impacted Central Asian countries in several significant ways. The number of labour migrants from Tajikistan declined by 10.6%, and in the case of Uzbekistan by 16.3% (Table 2). The numbers of migrants from other CIS countries have also decreased, however migration from Kyrgyzstan and Armenia was not as strongly affected by the crisis, presumably because they had recently become members of Eurasian Economic Union in 2015.⁸⁵

Table 2: The number of citizens of Central Asian States in Russia between March 2015 and February 2016

| Country | March 2015 | December 2015 | February 2016 ⁸⁶ |
|--------------|------------|---------------|-----------------------------|
| Kyrgyzstan | 523,221 | 542,928 | 563,080 |
| Tajikistan | 963,489 | 896,159 | 861,045 |
| Turkmenistan | 24,340 | 24,724 | 20,335 |
| Uzbekistan | 2,131,300 | 1,880,547 | 1,784,151 |

Source: EAK (2016).

83 Interview with Deputy Chairman of the State Service for Migration under the Government of the Kyrgyz Republic A. Asanbaev on 09.02.2016.

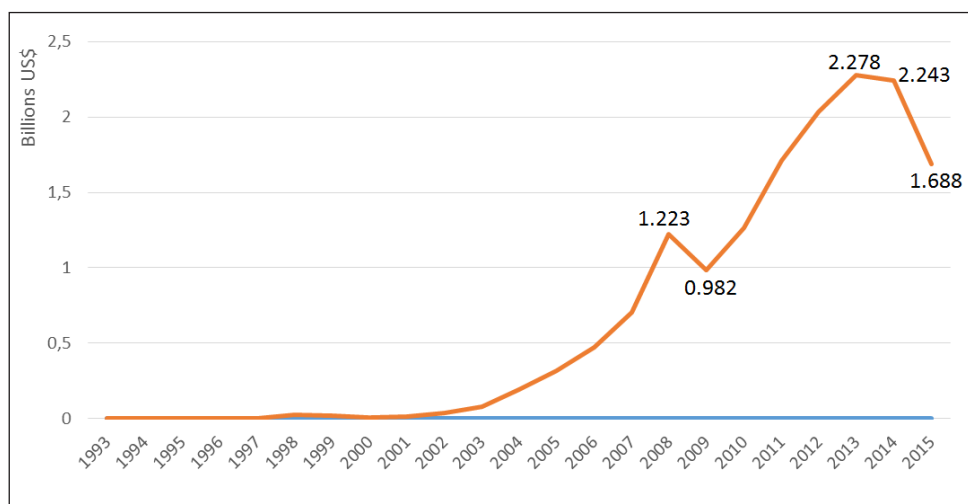
84 Interview with the director of the interregional public organization “Kyrgyz Birimdigi,” interviewed in Moscow on 18.02.16.

85 EAK, *Trudovaya migratsiia v EAES na nachalo 2016 goda*, Doklad EAK, 22 February 2016, <http://evrazklub.ru/analitik/trudovaya-migratsiya-v-eaes-na-nachalo-2016-goda-doklad-eak.html>, (accessed April 2016).

86 Data published on website of Federal Migration Service for 12 February 2016.

The economic crisis also had an important impact on the families that migrants left behind due to the devaluation of the ruble that resulted in the decline remittances from Russia. Other negative impacts include decreased wages, job cuts, late payments, and increase of prices. According to the World Bank, remittances decreased from US\$2.2 billion in 2014 to US\$1.7 billion in 2015.⁸⁷ A similar situation was previously documented during the Russian economic crisis in 1998-99, when remittances dropped from US\$1.2 billion to US\$0.982 million (Figure 4).

Figure 4. Personal remittances received in Kyrgyzstan (current US\$)



Source: World Bank (2016)⁸⁸

Because the cost of living in Russia has increased significantly in recent years – accommodation, food and utilities – several interviewed labor migrants in Moscow indicated that they can no longer send remittances back home. This is further compounded by increases in money transfer fees. The majority of interviewed labour migrants expressed disappointment with the devaluation of the ruble. Labour migrants involved in the trade sector (e.g. in open markets such as bazaars) also mentioned decreased trade with loss of customers.

Because of the crisis and reduced overall employment, Russian employers generally give preference to Russian workers. On the other hand, since the time of Kyrgyzstan's accession to the EAEU, employers who use foreign labourers illegally now either employ Kyrgyz migrants without labour contracts or simply engage labour migrants from Tajikistan and Uzbekistan.⁸⁹ The number of Kyrgyz labour migrants working illegally in Russia (i.e. those on blacklists) fell to 119,065 people. Yet, many of the illegal Kyrgyz labour migrants in Russia did not take advantage of the amnesty period (10 July to 1 November 2015) to legalise their status. Overall, the survey showed that 26% of migrants were working without official contracts, and most interviewees stated that Russian employers still wished to avoid working with contracts.

87 World Bank, *Personal Remittances, Received (Current US\$)*, <http://data.worldbank.org/indicator/BX.TRF.PWKR.CD.DT?locations=KG>, (accessed July 2016).

88 Ibid

89 Interview with Deputy Chairman of the State Service for Migration under the Government of the Kyrgyz Republic A. Asanbaev on 09.02.2016.

According to the Eurasian Analytical Club (EAC), the decrease of remittances was much higher in the case of non-EAEU countries. The EAC report on the first three quarters of 2015 highlighted in particular that remittances from non-EAEU labour migrants decreased by over 11%, compared to the same period in 2014, while remittances increased in Kyrgyzstan (15%) and Kazakhstan (24%).⁹⁰

The simplification of immigration laws for citizens of EAEU member states thus has contributed to the overall improvement of conditions for labour migrants; including a new legal status, the abolition of work permits and pre-entry examinations, and acknowledgement of the equivalency of educational qualifications from other countries.⁹¹ According to the Deputy Chairman of the State Service for Migration of Kyrgyzstan, A. Asanbaev, a Kyrgyz labour migrant now saves on average 23,000-25,000 rubles (US\$296-US\$321) due to the termination of work permits, language skills examination and medical test requirements.⁹² According to the EAC, a migrant saves 30,000-60,000 rubles (US\$386 – US\$771) due to the abolition of a patent for work.⁹³ Accession to EAEU thus opened opportunities for savings and can now lead to further growth of financial remittances and contribute to mitigation of the on-going impacts of the economic crisis.

7. CONCLUSION

International labour migration plays an important role in the economy of individual migrants' households and the country's economy. Kyrgyz accession to the EAEU has significantly impacted the dynamics of labour migration, including the reasons for migration, and has opened up new economic opportunities and activities. According to many concerned parties, the most positive outcomes of integration in EAEU are the freedom of movement between EAEU states, reforms of legal processes, the provision of social and medical insurance, and greater equality amongst the citizens of all EAEU countries. Added to these is the improvement in levels of incomes, especially in the context of movement from low-rank, unskilled, and low-paying jobs to middle-rank, better-paying jobs. However despite these positive developments, many Kyrgyz labour migrants still face a range of problems, especially related to the economic crisis.

Several other equally important issues are unresolved, such as registration for temporary residence and the acquisition of official employment contracts. These matters prey on the minds of Kyrgyz labour migrants, who are often very concerned with loss of income and fear deportation. Deportation – and being added to a migrant 'blacklist' – deprives not only an individual from her or his main source of income, but also his/her whole household. Of particular concern is also the predicament of women migrants, along with their children. Today only a small number of labour migrants have access to social and medical benefits, due mainly to

90 EAK (2016).

91 The documents on education and qualification issued in the states of the EAEU are accepted for members of the EAEU countries with the exception of documents for law, pedagogical, medical and pharmaceutical specialties, for these specialties require a separate procedure for recognition of education certificates.

92 Interview with Deputy Chairman of the State Service for Migration under the Government of the Kyrgyz Republic A. Asanbaev on 09.02.2016.

93 EAK (2016).

a lack of information about their rights or legal status. Hence, migrants could benefit from an increasing awareness of their improved rights under the EAEU.

The survey also showed that the expectations of many Kyrgyz labour migrants concerning improvements in their living and working situations, due to accession to the Eurasian Economic Union, have not yet been realized. Moreover, many of the labour migrants discern only minor changes and improvements. Since Kyrgyzstan's entry into the EAEU in 2015, significant issues remain for Kyrgyz labour migrants and their families in Russia; especially, the absence of dependable regulation. Arguably, more time is needed to allow for membership in the EAEU to show more tangible impact and also for Kyrgyz labour migrants to fully embrace their rights. Perhaps another year or two is needed to develop and implement a more dependable regulatory system. Although the benefits of EAEU membership are in part shadowed by the economic crisis, at the same time many of the negative effects of the economic crisis on labour migration have been slightly mitigated by the EAEU integration process. Granting all this, there is clearly a need for further study and analysis of the socio-economic realities of Kyrgyz labour migrants and for further investment by the government of Kyrgyzstan to establish, maintain and raise public awareness of reliable sources of information and support mechanisms for Kyrgyz labour migrants abroad.

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