

## Role of labor migrants from Central Asia in the socio-economic development of Russia in the context of new global challenges

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### Abstract

The article studies history of migration among the countries of Central Asia and Russia, the factors and scale of emigration to Russia against the background of sanctions from the European Union and the USA, and migrants' contribution to the economic and demographic development of the state. Migration processes from Central Asia to Russia have a long history dating back to Soviet times. After the collapse of the Soviet Union, migration took on unimaginable proportions and became one of the most important factors affecting economic and political life in both Central Asia and Russia. Labor migration began in the late 1990s and peaked in 2014. During their stay in Russia, migrants faced various crises. They have always played a significant role in the socio-economic development of the country. Although migration has always had both positive and negative consequences for the host countries, from an economic point of view it has rather a positive impact on the host countries' economies. After February 2022 Western countries have imposed new economic and political sanctions against Russia, which have affected the situation and orientation of labor migrants from Central Asian countries. Some migrants have started to look for other emigration channels, while the majority are still focused on Russia. Compared with previous crises, the migrant workers' role in Russia's economic and demographic development has increased now against the background of new sanctions.

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**Keywords:** labor migrants, sanctions, Central Asian countries, Russia, socio-demographic development, economic development, emigration, USSR, Western countries

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## Роль трудовых мигрантов из Центральной Азии в социально-экономическом развитии России в условиях новых глобальных вызовов

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### Аннотация

В статье рассматриваются история миграции между странами Центральной Азии (далее – ЦА) и Россией, факторы и масштабы эмиграции в Россию на фоне санкций со стороны Европейского союза и Соединенных Штатов Америки, вклад мигрантов в экономическое и демографическое развитие государства. Миграционные процессы из Центральной Азии в Россию имеют давнюю историю, берущую начало еще с советских времен. После распада Советского Союза миграция приобрела невообразимые масштабы и стала одним из важнейших факторов, влияющих на экономическую и политическую жизнь как в Центральной Азии, так и в России. Трудовая миграция началась в конце 1990-х гг. и достигла своего пика в 2014 г. В период нахождения в России мигранты сталкивались с различными кризисами. Они всегда играли значительную роль в социально-экономическом развитии страны. Хотя миграция всегда имела как положительные, так и отрицательные последствия для принимающих стран, с экономической точки зрения она оказывает скорее положительное влияние на экономику. После февраля 2022 г. западные страны ввели новые экономические и политические санкции в отношении России, которые повлияли на положение и ориентацию трудовых мигрантов из стран Центральной Азии. Некоторые мигранты начали искать другие каналы эмиграции, в то время как большинство по-прежнему ориентированы на Россию. По сравнению с предыдущими кризисами в настоящее время на фоне новых санкций роль трудовых мигрантов в экономическом и демографическом развитии России возросла.

**Ключевые слова:** трудовые мигранты, санкции, страны Центральной Азии, Россия, социально-демографическое развитие, экономическое развитие, эмиграция, СССР, страны Запада

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## Introduction

Migration movements between Russia and Central Asia are not a new phenomenon, nevertheless, new waves of migration have been observed since the collapse of the Soviet Union as a result of economic turmoil, as well as political instability [Rahmonova-Schwarz, 2010]. Over the past three decades, Russia has become an important target country: during the 1990s, mainly ethnic Russians from the Central Asian republics migrated to Russia. In the 2000s, more migrants Tajikistan, Uzbekistan, and Kyrgyzstan followed them to major Russian cities in search of work and, consequently, to ensure the livelihood of their families [Rahmonova-Schwarz, 2010].

Among the Central Asian countries, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, and Uzbekistan are the donor countries of labor migrants, while Kazakhstan is the recipient country. Consequently, the main focus of the study was on Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, and Uzbekistan [Myhre, 2014].

Against the background of economic and political sanctions against Russia by European countries and the United States of America (USA), migration can be considered as the main sources of development of Russia's demography, as well as strengthening the economy and labor market. The new sanctions have greatly affected the scale and influx of migrants from Central Asian countries to Russia. Factors such as the depreciation of the ruble (by 12 % in 2023 compared to 2021), the rise in the cost of labor patents (by 29 % in 2024 compared to 2021), the departure of foreign companies from Russia, the opening of new emigration channels, primarily to the UK and South Korea, influenced the orientation of some migrants from Central Asia to Russia [Ryazantsev, Rakhmonov, 2023]<sup>1,2,3</sup>.

Most of the migrants from Central Asian countries are still focused on Russia for reasons such as Russia's economic stability against the background of new sanctions, the growing shortage of labor in the Russian labor market, the lack of visa-free regimes between Central Asian countries and Russia, the economic dependence of some Central Asian countries, as well as Russia's interest in attracting and retaining migrants, since migrants They are the main tool for maintaining the course of Russian policy in Central Asian countries [Rakhmonov, 2023; Drobot, 2016].

The purpose of the study is to identify the impact of new sanctions on the scale of migrants from Central Asian countries in Russia, as well as to determine the contribution of migrant workers to the economic and demographic development of the country.

## History of migration among Central Asian countries and Russia

From the end of the 19th century until about the 1970s, Central Asia was a region of reception for migrants who belonged to a variety of categories: migrants in search of work, deportees, as well as refugees and prisoners of war of the First and Second World Wars. Over the course of a century, the proportion of migrants and people of immigrant origin in the region has been growing and accounted for more than half of the population, especially in some cities. However, already in the 1970s, the migration flow dried up, and emigration from Central Asia exceeded immigration. There were a number of reasons for this, primarily a demographic imbalance: while in Russia the growth rate of the already predominantly urbanized population was declining, in Central Asia, where the rural population prevailed, they continued to grow [Ramet, 1978]. Migration was also associated with the beginning of the active "nationalization" of Central Asian elites, who were increasingly worried about their status and strengthened their presence at all levels of government and economy. This caused the Russian-speaking part of the population to feel that they were a displaced minority.

In the 1980s, that is, back in Soviet times, they began to stimulate resettlement in the opposite direction: from overpopulated Central Asia to Russia, where depopulation and labor shortages had already become a serious problem. Resettlement took place in an organized way, for example, through the regular recruitment of labor – the so-called labor battalions of the army, which were actually engaged in the construction of civilian facilities in Russia. Finally, they began to plan and even implement a project aimed at the mass and permanent relocation of entire families from Central Asia to rural areas of the Russian Soviet Federative Socialist Republic. However, these plans were stopped by the collapse of the Soviet Union [Ball, Demko, 1978].

The post-Soviet migration exchange between Russia and Central Asian countries after 1991 can be divided into two stages: the 1990s and the 2000s.

The newly independent republics declared themselves national States. The Central Asian countries have more or less actively launched a policy of ethnicization of all strata of society in favor of the "titular nation". The result was a mass migration of those who became a minority to countries they considered "their own": Russians,

<sup>1</sup> The dollar-ruble exchange rate for 2021. Available at: <https://myfin.by/currency/cb-rf-archive/usd/2021> (accessed 15.03.2024).

<sup>2</sup> The dollar-ruble exchange rate for 2023. Available at: <https://myfin.by/currency/cb-rf-archive/usd/2023> (accessed 15.03.2024).

<sup>3</sup> The Ministry of Internal Affairs of the Russian Federation. Statistical information on the migration situation. Available at: <https://мвд.рф/department/statistics/migraciionnaya> (accessed 15.03.2024).

Tatars, North Caucasians and others migrated to the Russian Federation, Ukrainians and Crimean Tatars to Ukraine, Germans to Germany, Jews to Israel, etc. [Yazdani, 2021].

Additional factors of the “push” were the severe economic crisis that engulfed all post-Soviet countries, and political instability, especially in Tajikistan, where a civil war raged in 1992–1997 [Yazdani, 2021].

At the end of the 1990s and the beginning of the 21st century, there were drastic changes in the main trends of migration from Central Asia to Russia. Although the outflow of those segments of the population who wanted to return to their historical homeland continued, along with this, a new, rapidly growing migration arose, the main purpose of which was labor income. The first labor migrants arrived in Russia along with the main wave of repatriates. However, over time, labor migration gained its own momentum [Ryazantsev, Bogdanov, 2017].

The rapid recovery of the Russian economy after the 1998 crisis, combined with the continuing decline in the population, led to a shortage of labor in the Russian labor market by about 2005, facilitated by visa-free travel and cultural ties, which attracted migrants from the former Soviet republics, who in turn had a surplus of labor with continued growth population, but a decrease in economic indicators [Abashin, 2014].

In 2015, a new stage of emigration from Central Asian countries to Russia began. The legislation governing the legal stay of migrants without Russian citizenship has changed (legalization includes the right to work): there is a visa-free regime for a limited period, the possibility of obtaining a work patent, as well as temporary residence permits and residence rights. For citizens of Uzbekistan and Tajikistan, the purchase of a work patent has become a prerequisite for legal residence for a period of more than three months. Citizens of Kyrgyzstan, which has been a member of the Eurasian Economic Union (EAEU) since 2015, are required to register only at their place of residence and sign an employment contract [Gurieva, 2019].

### **Factors and scale of labor migrants emigration from Central Asia to Russia against the background of sanctions by the European Union and the United States of America**

Throughout their stay in Russia, migrants from Central Asian countries faced various crises, and each of them had a different impact on the scale and influx of migrants. New sanctions by Western countries against Russia in connection with the Ukrainian conflict have greatly affected the situation of migrant workers from Central Asian countries. However, the main factor contributing to the continuation of emigration against the background of sanctions by the European Union and the United

States remains economic stabilization and a growing shortage of labor in the Russian labor market due to unfavorable demographic development [Rakhmonov, 2022]. According to the International Monetary Fund, in 2023, the gross domestic product of the Russian Federation per capita was about 13 thousand USD<sup>4</sup>. In the Central Asian countries in 2023, it amounted to: in Kyrgyzstan – 1.9 thousand USD, in Tajikistan – 1.36 thousand USD, in Uzbekistan – 2.5 thousand USD<sup>5,6,7</sup>.

Another factor in the continuation of emigration is the spread of the Russian language in Central Asian countries. With the exception of Uzbekistan, Russian is the official language in all countries of the region [Letnyakov, 2015].

According to the author's calculations, the majority of migrants in Russia are migrants from Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan and Uzbekistan. According to the Ministry of Internal Affairs of the Russian Federation (hereinafter – the Ministry of Internal Affairs of the Russian Federation), over 61 % of the total number of migrants in Russia accounted for migrants from Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan and Uzbekistan in 2019–2022.

According to the Ministry of Internal Affairs of the Russian Federation, in 2019 – second half 2023, the number of migrants from Central Asian countries averaged more than 8.5 million people (Table 1). The largest number of migrants were from Uzbekistan (51 %), Tajikistan (about 32 %) and Kyrgyzstan (about 18 %). After the start of a special military operation in Ukraine, Western countries imposed new economic sanctions against Russia [Timofeev, 2022]. The departure of foreign companies and the depreciation of the ruble against the national currencies of Central Asian countries led to the fact that some migrants began to reorient themselves to other channels of emigration [Rakhmonov, 2023]. According to the Ministry of Internal Affairs of the Russian Federation, the number of migrants from Central Asian countries to Russia decreased by 2.14 million people in 6 months of 2023 compared to second half 2022 (Fig. 1). The number of migrants from Uzbekistan (– 1.22 million people), Tajikistan (– 0.88 million people) and Kyrgyzstan (– 0.05 million people) decreased the most.

<sup>4</sup> Russia's GDP growth in 2023 has been estimated. Available at: <https://lenta.ru/news/2023/12/30/otsenen-rost-vvp-rossii-v-2023-godu/> (accessed 15.03.2024).

<sup>5</sup> In 2023, GDP per capita growth in Kyrgyzstan will be 19 %. Available at: <https://clck.ru/3Ayfh4> (accessed 15.03.2024).

<sup>6</sup> The economy of Tajikistan. Online statistics. Available at: <https://take-profit.org/statistics/countries/tajikistan/> (accessed 15.03.2024).

<sup>7</sup> Sorochin E. Uzbekistan's GDP in 2023 reached 1.07 quadrillion soums. Available at: <https://clck.ru/3AyfsW> (accessed 15.03.2024).

Table 1

## The scale of emigration from Central Asian countries to Russia for 2019 – second half 2023

Year	Kyrgyzstan, in million people	Tajikistan, in million people	Uzbekistan, in million people
2019	1.06	2.75	4.81
2020	0.74	1.93	3.46
2021	1.06	3.08	4.96
2022	1.18	4.45	6.35
Second half 2023	0.47	1.28	1.89

Source<sup>8</sup>

The factors that influenced the decline in the number of migrants from Central Asian countries to Russia were economic sanctions from Western countries, as well as new channels of emigration from Central Asian countries to the United Kingdom and South Korea. After Brexit, the UK began to actively attract migrant workers for seasonal migration to its labor market. Previously, highly skilled migrants mainly migrated to the UK, but after the loss of workers from Eastern European countries, the state began to attract low-skilled migrants<sup>10</sup>. Thus, the UK began to actively compete with Russia for migrant workers from Central Asian countries.

<sup>8</sup> The Ministry of Internal Affairs of the Russian Federation. Statistical information on the migration situation. Available at: <https://мвд.рф/dejatelnost/statistics/migracionnaya> (accessed 15.03.2024).

<sup>9</sup> Ibid.

<sup>10</sup> Lillis J. Migrant workers from Central Asia travel to the UK. Available at: <https://russian.eurasianet.org/трудоые-мигранты-из-центральной-азии-едут-в-великобританию> (accessed 15.03.2024).

### Contribution of Central Asian migrants to the Russian economy in the context of economic sanctions

From an economic point of view, migration has a positive impact on the economies of host countries rather than a negative one. Labor migrants from Central Asian countries, in addition to contributing to the economy of their republics, also play a role in the development of the Russian economy [Rakhmonov, 2021].

During the period of economic sanctions by Western countries against Russia, the contribution of migrant workers plays a significant role in supporting the Russian economy [Filippova, 2022]. Thus, at the end of 2022, the contribution of migrant workers to the budget of Moscow amounted to 32 billion rubles in taxes<sup>11</sup>. According to Maria Bagreeva, Minister of the Government of Moscow, head of the Department of Economic Policy and Development, “today migrant workers work in such

<sup>11</sup> Protsenko Yu. Migrants paid almost 32 billion rubles for patents to the Moscow budget in 2022. Available at: <https://rg.ru/2023/01/27/reg-cfo/mariia-bagreeva-migranty-zaplatili-za-patenty-v-biudzheth-moskvy-v-2022-godu-pochti-32-milliarda-rublej.html> (accessed 15.03.2024).

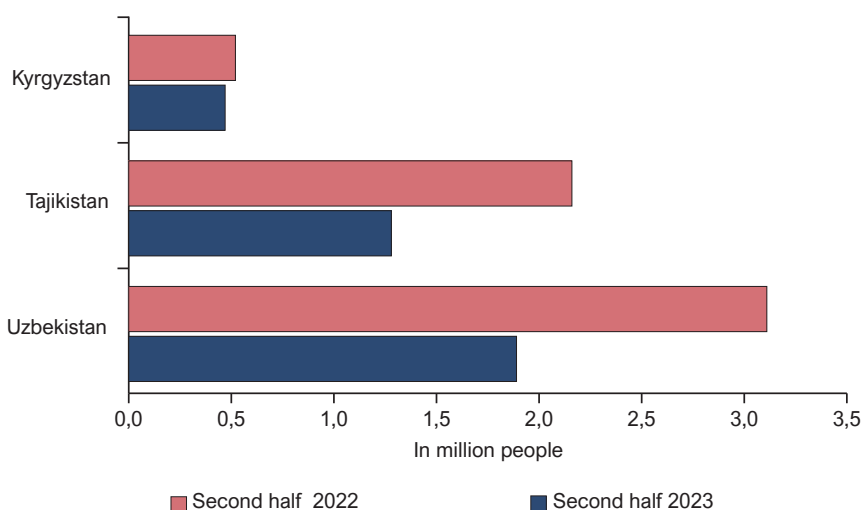
Source<sup>9</sup>

Fig. 1. Scale of emigration from Central Asian countries to Russia in second half 2022–2023



important sectors for the capital as construction, housing and communal services, trade, transport, delivery, occupying positions that Moscow residents are most often reluctant to work for. In addition, foreign citizens make a significant contribution to the city's economy. For 2015–2022 the volume of revenues to the Moscow budget in the form of payments for a labor patent amounted to about 145 billion rubles, or about 2 % of the receipts of the personal income tax – one of the three key taxes that form the city budget”<sup>12</sup>.

Besides taxes, another contribution that migrant workers make to the Russian economy is the contribution from labor patents (Table 2). Among the Central Asian countries, patents are acquired only by citizens of Tajikistan and Uzbekistan. Citizens of Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan, as member States of the EAEU, are exempt from patents under the agreement between the member states [Pomerlyan, 2022].<sup>13</sup>

The cost of patents for migrant workers in Russia is increasing every year. The average cost of patents in the regions where migrant workers from Tajikistan and Uzbekistan work in 2021 amounted to 4.993 thousand rubles (67.66 USD), in 2022 – 5.439 thousand

rubles (80.48 USD), in 2023 – 6.363 thousand rubles (77.41 USD)<sup>14,15,16</sup>.

In 2021 – the second half of 2023, citizens of Tajikistan and Uzbekistan acquired about 11 million patents, and the contribution from patents over the same period amounted to about 60.8 billion rubles, or 820.79 million USD.

### Naturalization of migrants from Central Asia as a contribution to demography development in Russia

According to experts, the population of Russia since 2012 may decrease from 142 to 100 million people by 2050<sup>17</sup>. Russia is experiencing a demographic crisis that is reaching proportions that threaten the economic development of the country and the development of political security. In this regard, migration is increasingly seen as the most important tool in the fight against population decline and the growing shortage of qualified personnel.

The number of people who have received Russian citizenship from Central Asian countries is growing every year. According to the Ministry of Internal Affairs of the Russian Federation, in 2019 –second half 2023, about 857.5 thousand migrants from the Central Asian republics received Russian citizenship. More than half of the total number is accounted for by migrants from

<sup>12</sup> In 2022, foreign citizens transferred almost 32 billion rubles in taxes to the Moscow budget. Available at: <https://www.mos.ru/news/item/119194073/> (accessed 15.03.2024).

<sup>13</sup> The Ministry of Internal Affairs of the Russian Federation. Statistical information on the migration situation. Available at: <https://мвд.рф/де-жателност/statistics/migracionnaya> (accessed 15.03.2024).

<sup>14</sup> The dollar-ruble exchange rate for 2021. Available at: <https://myfin.by/currency/cb-rf-archive/usd/2021> (accessed 15.03.2024).

<sup>15</sup> The dollar-ruble exchange rate for 2022. Available at: <https://myfin.by/currency/cb-rf-archive/usd/2022> (accessed 15.03.2024).

<sup>16</sup> The dollar-ruble exchange rate for 2023. Available at: <https://myfin.by/currency/cb-rf-archive/usd/2023> (accessed 15.03.2024).

<sup>17</sup> Johann C. Demographie in der Krise: Russlands Migrationsdebatte. Available at: [https://www.kas.de/c/document\\_library/get\\_file?uuid=1e8518c6-e54a-74e8-6dfa-9ec320424570&groupId=252038](https://www.kas.de/c/document_library/get_file?uuid=1e8518c6-e54a-74e8-6dfa-9ec320424570&groupId=252038) (accessed 15.03.2024).

**Contribution of labor migrants from Uzbekistan and Tajikistan due to labor patents to the Russian economy for 2021 – second half 2023**

Table 2

Year	Patent statistics, in million pieces		The average cost of patents by Russian regions		The contribution of migrants to the Russian economy	
	Tajikistan	Uzbekistan	In rubles	In USD	In billion rubles	In million USD
2021	1.43	2.47	4,993	67.66	19,467.57	263.82
2022	1.45	2.35	5,439	80.48	20,678.50	305.99
Second half 2023	1.13	2.11	6,363	77.41	20,630.87	250.98
Total	4.02	6.93	–	–	60,776.93	820.79

Source<sup>13</sup>

Tajikistan (51%), Kazakhstan (23.3%), Uzbekistan (12.9%) and Kyrgyzstan (8.7%) (Table 3).

Compared with Kyrgyzstan, Uzbekistan and Tajikistan, ethnic Russians living in Kazakhstan apply for citizenship of the Russian Federation the most.

After the collapse of the Soviet Union, a demographic crisis began in Russia [Muradova, 2011]. According to the demographic yearbook of Russia, the population of the Russian Federation decreased by 5.7 million people from 1995 to 2011 and by 2.1 million people since 1995 compared to 2023. The decline in the Russian population is seen in the low birth rate. So, in 1990, there were 13.4 births per 1 thousand inhabitants, in 2011 the fertility rate was 11.05 births per 1 thousand inhabitants. Accordingly, during the demographic crisis, migration can be considered as one of the key tools for the development of demography.

<sup>18</sup> The Ministry of Internal Affairs of the Russian Federation. Statistical information on the migration situation. Available at: <https://mvd.rf/de-jatelnost/statistics/migracionnaya> (accessed 15.03.2024).

Due to migrants from Central Asian countries, in 2020 – second half 2023, the population of Russia increased by 857.5 thousand people and decreased by only 1 %. Excluding migrants, the Russian population could have decreased by 1.53 % (Table 4).

In 2020, due to the flow of migrants from Central Asian countries, the Russian population increased by 0.08 %. Excluding migrants, it could have decreased by 0.02 %. Thus, the role of migrants from Central Asian countries in the development of Russia's demography is great.

## Results

The main factors contributing to the continuation of emigration from Central Asian countries against the background of sanctions from the European Union and the United States against Russia are still economic stabilization and a growing shortage of labor in the Russian labor market due to unfavorable demographic development.

<sup>19</sup> Ibid.

Table 3

### Statistics on migrants from Central Asian countries who obtained Russian citizenship in 2019 – second half 2023

Year	Kazakhstan, in thousand people	Kyrgyzstan, in thousand people	Tajikistan, in thousand people	Uzbekistan, in thousand people
2019	50.5	9.4	44.7	19.4
2020	43.4	11.9	63.4	23.1
2021	49.9	19.2	103.7	31.9
2022	42.0	23.5	173.6	27.2
Second half 2023	13.9	10.5	87.0	9.3
Total	199.6	74.5	472.4	110.9

Source<sup>18</sup>

Table 4

### Dynamics of change in the population of Russia with/without migrants from Central Asia in 2020 – second half 2023

Year	The population of the Russian Federation, in million people	The population of the Russian Federation excluding migrants, in million people	Dynamics of change in the population of the Russian Federation	
			Considering migrants, %	Excluding migrants, %
2020	148.0	147.7	0.08	– 0.02
2021	147.5	147.8	– 0.34	– 0.48
2022	147.0	147.3	– 0.32	– 0.50
Second half 2023	146.3	146.7	– 0.45	– 0.53

Source<sup>19</sup>

According to the author's calculations, the majority of migrants in Russia are migrants from Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, and Uzbekistan, which is over 61 % of the total number of migrants.

New economic and political sanctions against Russia have affected the scale and influx of migrants from Central Asian countries. According to the Ministry of Internal Affairs of the Russian Federation, the number of migrants decreased by 2.14 million people in 6 months of 2023 compared to second half 2022. Among the Central Asian countries, the number of migrants from Uzbekistan (– 1.22 million people), Tajikistan (– 0.88 million people), and Kyrgyzstan (– 0.05 million people) decreased the most.

During the sanctions period, the contribution of migrant workers played a significant role in supporting the Russian economy. Thus, by the end of 2022, the contribution of migrant workers to the budget of Moscow amounted to 32 billion rubles in taxes. In addition to taxes, in 2021 – second half 2023, migrant workers from Uzbekistan and Tajikistan contributed about 60.8 billion rubles, or 820.79 USD, to the Russian economy through labor patents.

Migrant workers from Central Asia have also made a significant contribution to the demographic development of Russia. Due to migrants, from 2020 to second half 2023, the population of Russia increased by 857.5 thousand people and decreased by only 1 %. Excluding migrants from Central Asian countries, Russia's population could have decreased by 1.53 %. In addition, in 2020, thanks to migrants, the country's population increased by 0.08 %, and without migrants it could have decreased by 0.02 %.

## Conclusion

The primary economic nature of migration determines its structural features. The migrants are mainly residents of rural areas and small towns, as well as low-skilled workers, that is, people who have difficulty getting well-paid jobs at home.

The new economic downturn in Russia due to the Ukrainian crisis has affected the number and influx of migrants from Central Asian countries [Belikov, 2023]. Thus, in the 6 months of 2023, the number of migrants decreased by 37 % compared to second half 2022.

In addition to the Ukrainian crisis, there have also been three mass returns of migrants from Russia to Central Asian countries in the entire migration history between Central Asia and Russia. The first occurred in 2009 and was associated with two economic crises in Russia. At that time, the number of Uzbek and Tajik migrants decreased by about 20–25%, but in 2010 the trend changed again.

The second stage took place between 2014 and 2016, and it led to job losses and a drop in the ruble exchange rate against the USD, the main currency of migrant remittances, by almost 200 %. In parallel with the decline in income due to the crisis, fees for the legalization of residence and wages have increased. In addition, in 2013, the practice of deporting foreigners for minor offenses was tightened and a ban on re-entry was introduced. In total, in 2013–2016, more than 1.8 million foreign citizens were banned from entry, almost 400 thousand of them were expelled or deported earlier. These events led to the fact that in 2016 the number of labor migrants from Central Asia decreased to 3.4 million people, that is, by 21 %.

The third stage was in 2019, during the spread of COVID-19. The number of migrants from Central Asian countries in Russia decreased by 2.5 million people in 2020, or by 29.3 % compared to 2019.

As the study shows, against the background of economic and political sanctions against Russia, migrant workers have made a significant contribution to the economic and demographic development of Russia.

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