

# COVID-19 PANDEMIC

## THE IMPACT OF THE COVID-19 PANDEMIC ON THE POSITION OF LABOR MIGRANTS FROM CENTRAL ASIA IN RUSSIA

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## ABSTRACT

**T**he article examines the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on the position of Central Asian labor migrants in Russia. The article notes the significant role of labor migration in the formation of Russia's gross domestic product and budget. The ethnic specialization of Central Asian labor migrants in the Russian economy is described: migrants from Uzbekistan and Tajikistan work in construction and agriculture, those from Kyrgyzstan—in trade, the service sphere and public catering. The economic downturn during the COVID-19 pandemic reduced the employment rate of labor migrants from Central Asian countries in the Russian economy significantly, albeit unevenly. Numerous workers from Tajikistan and Uzbekistan engaged in construction, maintenance and transport lost their jobs. A sociological

survey of labor migrants revealed that the key problems of Central Asian labor migrants during the pandemic were the loss of work and income, the inability to pay for housing and food, and increased pressure from the security forces. Considering the significant scale of the decline in production and the growth of unemployment among labor migrants in Russia, the volume of money transfers to Central Asian countries is expected to decrease in the coming months. The highest rates of decline are expected in Tajikistan and Uzbekistan, to a lesser extent in Kyrgyzstan. The coordination of Russia's actions with the donor countries of Central Asia in the sphere of humanitarian aid, transportation of migrants to their homeland, and reduction of pressure on migration communities should be a key area at the international level.

**KEYWORDS:** *Coronavirus disease (COVID-19), pandemic, Russia, Central Asia, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, Turkmenistan, Uzbekistan, labor migrants, money remittances, legal status, income, self-isolation.*

## Relevance of Research

According to WHO terminology, COVID-19 is an infectious disease caused by the last of the recently discovered types of coronavirus.<sup>1</sup> The first outbreak of infection occurred in the capital of the Chinese Hubei province, the city of Wuhan, at the end of 2019. Due to the spread of COVID-19 and its danger to human health, WHO announced the start of a pandemic on 12 March, 2020.<sup>2</sup>

As of 2 May, 2020, 3,469,812 cases of COVID-19 coronavirus infection were detected in the world, including 243,780 dead and 1,117,010 recovered patients.

In Russia, the total number of cases equaled 124,054, with 1,222 deaths and 15,013 recoveries. In Russia, the epidemic began in Moscow, consequently spreading to the regions in a gradual mode. Both the local population and labor migrants from the Central Asian countries, whose number in Russia ranges from 2 to 3 million people, were at risk. Currently, Uzbekistan, Tajikistan and Kyrgyzstan are the key labor force donors for the Russian Federation and the Republic of Kazakhstan.<sup>3</sup>

Through return migration and tourists, the virus also entered the Central Asian states, most likely through Russia. By the beginning of May 2020, 3,857 cases were detected in Kazakhstan, 26 people died and 985 recovered; there was a total of 769 cases in Kyrgyzstan, 8 people died and 527 recovered; 2,118 cases in Uzbekistan, with 9 deaths and 1,271 recoveries. The Tajik authorities have long denied the presence of coronavirus in their country, which was surprising in the face of active labor migration with Russia and Kazakhstan. However, by early May 2020, the authorities had officially announced 76 cases and 2 deaths. No coronavirus has been officially detected in Turkmenistan.<sup>4</sup> However, experts believe that the reason is the secrecy of information and the lack of testing in this country.

In order to contain and reduce the spread of COVID-19, the Government of the Russian Federation has restricted the entry of foreign citizens and stateless persons into the country from 18 March to 1 May, 2020.<sup>5</sup>

Meanwhile, all recipient and donor countries of labor migrants, including the Central Asian republics, began to shut down their state borders. As a result of travel restrictions, international mobility dropped sharply, practically coming to a halt by early April. Tajikistan and Uzbekistan virtually shut down their borders. Kyrgyzstan only accepts evacuation flights with its citizens onboard. Kazakhstan also closed its borders and declared a state of emergency.

Many labor migrants from Central Asian countries were left without work in Russia or trapped at the borders, unable to return to their countries. As a result, the position of both categories of migrants from Central Asia remains difficult, as people are left without means of subsistence, sources of income, cannot pay for housing and food.

<sup>1</sup> See: The WHO official website [<https://www.who.int/news-room/q-a-detail/q-a-coronaviruses>].

<sup>2</sup> See: The WHO Regional Office for Europe [<http://www.euro.who.int/ru/health-topics/health-emergencies/coronavirus-covid-19/news/news/2020/3/who-announces-covid-19-outbreak-a-pandemic>].

<sup>3</sup> See: S. Ryazantsev, Z. Vazirov, E. Pismennaya, L. Delovarova, "China in Central Asia: Geopolitical, Economic, and Sociocultural Vectors of Influence," *Central Asia and the Caucasus. English Edition*, Vol. 20, Issue 4, 2019, pp. 18-31.

<sup>4</sup> See: The RF Operational Headquarters [<https://стопкоронавирус.рф>], Kazakhstan—[<https://www.coronavirus2020.kz/>], Kyrgyzstan: Republican Headquarters of the Kyrgyz Republic to Combat COVID-19—[<https://t.me/RshKRCOV>], Uzbekistan: Official Telegram Channel of the Health Ministry of the Republic of Uzbekistan—[<https://t.me/ssvuz>], [<https://coronavirus-monitor.ru/>], [<https://www.who.int/emergencies/diseases/novel-coronavirus-2019>].

<sup>5</sup> See: *Order of the Government of the Russian Federation of 16 March, 2020 No. 635-r*, available in Russian at [<http://static.government.ru/media/files/wwGGarWzAuGcDRw4OFHBfkInXcpD0ZPu.pdf>].

## Employment of Labor Migrants from Central Asia in the Russian Economy Prior to the Pandemic

According to the Ministry of Internal Affairs, prior to the start of the COVID-19 pandemic on 1 April, 2020, there was a total of 4.17 million labor migrants in Russia.<sup>6</sup> Considering the fact that migrants from the Central Asian countries account for about 76% of the total number of labor migrants in Russia, *about 3.2 million documented labor migrants from Central Asian countries could have been located in Russia* at the outset of the pandemic. In addition, about 2.5 million labor migrants were employed in the informal or shadow sector of the Russian economy without registration or a written contract, and were deprived of passports. Their freedom of movement was restricted, they were living on their worksites and were unable to leave the construction site or enterprise. Many migrants come from Central Asian countries—the number of undocumented migrants may have approximated 1.9 million (see Table 1).

Table 1

**Number of Labor Migrants from Central Asia in Russia  
in the First Two Quarters of 2019—2020**

Labor Migration Indicators		January-March 2020	January-March 2019
Number of migration registrations of foreign citizens and stateless persons		3,486,500	3,585,104
—including for work purposes		1,204,343	1,273,234
—including those from Central Asian countries		915,055	930,224
—including those from	Kazakhstan	29,162	28 001
	Kyrgyzstan	93,109	97 522
	Tajikistan	276,405	269 683
	Turkmenistan	1,467	1 197
	Uzbekistan	514,912	533 821
Work permits executed for foreign citizens and stateless persons, total		16,128	23,550
—including those for	Highly qualified employees	5,996	7 413
	Qualified employees	1,728	3 252
Patents executed for foreign citizens and stateless persons		426,726	377,525

*S o u r c e:* Statistical Data on Migration. Data Provided by the Main Directorate for Migration Affairs, available in Russian at [<https://мвд.рф/Deljatelnost/statistics/migracionnaya/2/>].

<sup>6</sup> See: Yu.F. Florinskaya, “Trudovaia migratsiia v RF na etape zakrytiia granits,” *Monitoring ekonomicheskoy situatsii v Rossii. Tendentsii i vyzovy sotsialno-ekonomicheskogo razvitiia*, No. 7 (109), April 2020, p. 14, available at [[https://www.iep.ru/files/text/crisis\\_monitoring/2020\\_7-109\\_April-1.pdf](https://www.iep.ru/files/text/crisis_monitoring/2020_7-109_April-1.pdf)].

Citizens of Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan, which are members of the EAEU, do not need to obtain permits, only registration at the place of stay to be employed in Russia. Labor migrants from Uzbekistan and Tajikistan need to apply for a patent. Approximately 1.7 million labor patents are issued in Russia annually, which brings about 60 billion rubles to Russian regional budgets.<sup>7</sup> About 427,000 patents were issued for foreigners to work in Russia in Q1 2020, that is, at the beginning of the COVID-19 pandemic. Every month, labor migrants from Uzbekistan and Tajikistan are obliged to pay personal income tax in the amount that differs in various Russian regions (see Table 2). In 2019, the Moscow Multifunctional Migration Center issued 263,700 labor patents. According to the Department of Economic Policy and Development of Moscow, in 2019 the city budget received 18.3 billion rubles from the sale of patents. The majority of patents in Moscow were obtained by citizens of Uzbekistan and Tajikistan (50% and 38%, respectively). Thus, citizens of the two Central Asian countries who obtained patents replenished the Moscow budget by 16.1 billion rubles. In 2015-2019, foreign citizens in Moscow obtained a total of over 2 million patents, adding 77 billion rubles to the city budget. Thus, *according to our calculations, citizens of Central Asian countries contributed 67.8 billion rubles in direct revenues to the Moscow budget.* The Mayor of Moscow Sergey Sobyenin noted that the city budget receives more money from the sale of labor patents to migrants than from oil companies' taxes.<sup>8</sup>

Table 2

**Cost of Labor Migrant Patents  
in Specific Russian Regions (rubles)**

Year	Moscow	Moscow Region	St. Petersburg
2018	4,500	4,300	3,500
2019	5,000	4,750	3,800
2020	5,341	5,092	4,000

*Sources:* Official website of the Multifunctional Migration Center in Moscow [<https://mc.mos.ru/ru/worker/get-patent/>]; Official website of the Federal Tax Agency [[https://www.nalog.ru/rn50/news/activities\\_fts/9525617/](https://www.nalog.ru/rn50/news/activities_fts/9525617/)]; Official website of the Administration of St. Petersburg [<https://www.gov.spb.ru/press/governor/176712/>].

In April, May, August and September 2019, the Federal State Statistics Service (Rosstat) conducted a sample survey of migrant labor. As part of the observation, over 130,000 households with members 15 years and older (0.24% of the total number of households) were interviewed in all Russian regions. Information on the employment of migrants in households is broken down by dominant type of work or service provided. Rosstat also conducts sample surveys of the labor force in Russia on a regular basis. As a result, there is information on the labor activity of migrants by type, determined by the predominant type of the entrepreneur's economic activity.

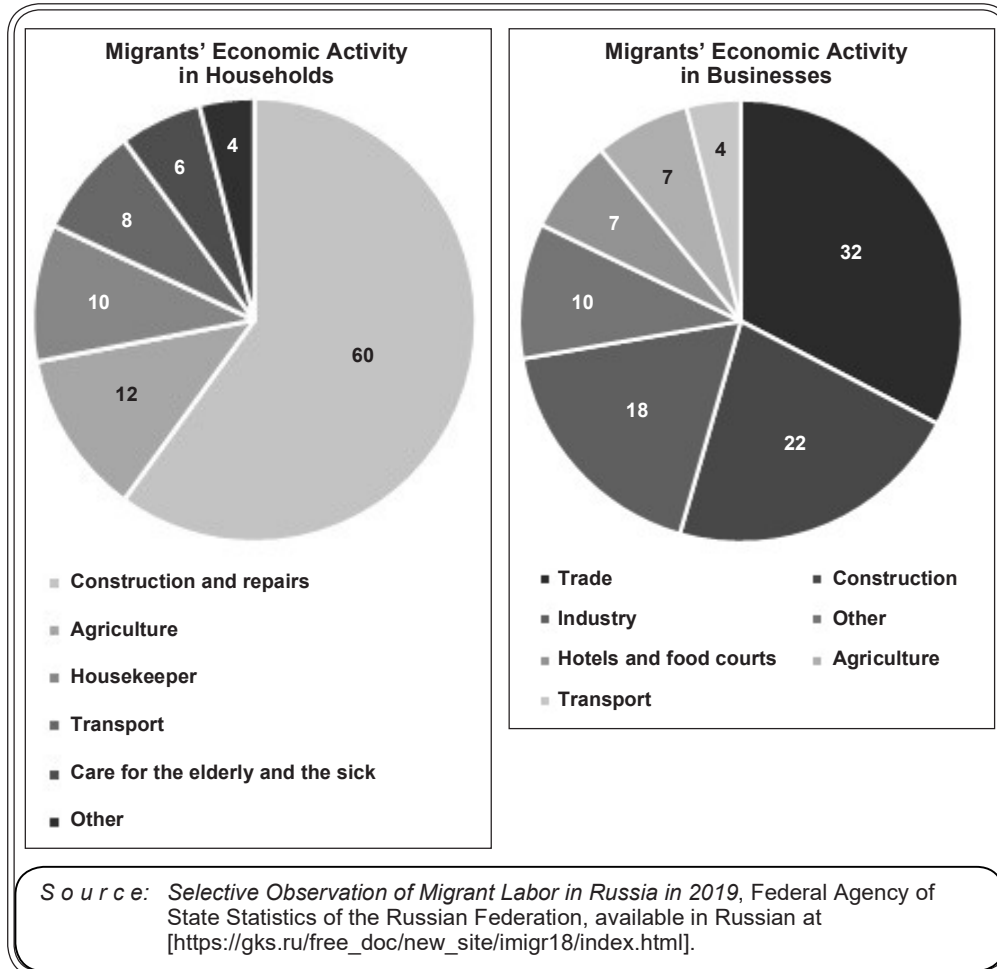
According to Rosstat, the majority of labor migrants are employed in the following spheres of the economy: construction and repair work (60% in households and 22% in businesses), trade (32% in

<sup>7</sup> See: "Moskva zarabotala milliardy na migrantakh," Lenta.ru, 10 February, 2020, available at [<https://lenta.ru/news/2020/02/10/migration/>].

<sup>8</sup> See: "Dokhody Moskvyy ot prodazhi patentov prevysili dokhody ot nefianykh kompaniy—RBK," 29 January, 2016, available at [<https://www.rbc.ru/rbcfreenews/56ab4f3a9a794770ae03f7d6>].

Figure 1

Labor Migrants' Employment Structure in Russia by Type of Economic Activity, %



businesses), industry (18% in businesses), agriculture (12% in households and 7% in businesses), transportation (8% in households and 4% in businesses), elderly care (6% in households), hotels and catering (7% in businesses) (see Fig. 1).

An ethno-geographic specialization of labor migrant employment in Russia has developed: citizens of Uzbekistan and Tajikistan are chiefly employed in construction, agriculture, industry, and transport spheres; citizens of Kyrgyzstan—in trade, services, public catering, as domestic workers, caring for the sick, the elderly and children in Russian families; citizens of Turkmenistan are mainly employed in industry; citizens of Kazakhstan—in the non-production sphere.

Labor migration from Central Asian countries is of great economic importance for the Russian economy. Labor migrants produce about 8% of Russia's GDP, and migrants from Central Asian countries may be generating 2/3 of that amount. Also, labor migrants contribute to decreasing the

shortage of labor resources, stimulate the development of some sectors of the economy, and replenish the population of regions and settlements in Russia that are being depopulated.<sup>9</sup>

## The Response of the Authorities and the Change in the Status of Labor Migrants in Russia

During the pandemic, restrictive measures in Russia started with the actions taken by the Moscow authorities: on 5 March, 2020, a high alert regime was introduced in the city due to the threat of the spread of COVID-19. A 14-day home isolation regime was enforced upon arrival from 7 countries with the maximum spread of infection at that time (China, Republic of Korea, Italy, Iran, France, Germany, Spain). This measure barely affected labor migrants from Central Asia.<sup>10</sup> In order to contain and reduce the spread of COVID-19, the Government of the Russian Federation has restricted the entry of all foreign citizens and stateless persons into the country from 18 March to 1 May, 2020.<sup>11</sup>

As the COVID-19 situation deteriorated, the President of the Russian Federation established non-working days between 30 March and 3 April, 2020, with wages preserved for employees.<sup>12</sup> This regime was subsequently extended from 4 April to 30 April, 2020 inclusive. In fact, during this period, the activities of most trade enterprises (except for food and pharmacy), hotel and restaurant business (except for the export of food), construction and transport were suspended.<sup>13</sup> Gradually, the Russian authorities limited air traffic with foreign countries. And since 27 March, 2020, Russia's airspace has been practically closed—flights to and from other countries have been canceled, except for the return of Russian citizens and the outflow of foreign citizens. These measures directly affected labor migrants, most of whom were from Central Asia, had lost their jobs, and at the same time could not leave Russia.

Moscow authorities gradually tightened the regime by canceling mass events, expanding the list of arrival countries for returnees' self-isolation, enforcing isolation for people over 65, and restricting attendance at educational institutions. Gyms, fitness clubs and swimming pools have also been closed since 21 March, 2020.<sup>14</sup> From 28 March to 5 April, 2020 in Moscow, restaurants, cafes, canteens,

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<sup>9</sup> See: S.V. Ryazantsev, "Trudovaia immigratsiia v Rossii: mify i kontrargumenty," *Vestnik Rossiyskogo universiteta družby narodov*, Series: *Ekonomika*, Vol. 26, No. 4, 2018, pp. 718-729, DOI: 10.22363/2313-2329-2018-26-4-718-729, available at [<http://journals.rudn.ru/economics/article/view/20764/16762>].

<sup>10</sup> *Decree of the Mayor of Moscow dated 5 March, 2020 No. 12-UM On the Introduction of a High Alert Regime*, available at [<https://www.mos.ru/upload/documents/docs/12-YM.pdf>].

<sup>11</sup> *Order of the Government of the Russian Federation dated 16 March, 2020 No. 635-r*.

<sup>12</sup> *Decree of the President of the Russian Federation On the Announcement of Non-Working Days in Russia dated 25 March, 2020*, available at [<http://kremlin.ru/events/president/news/63065>].

<sup>13</sup> *Decree of the President of the Russian Federation On Measures to Ensure the Sanitary and Epidemiological Well-Being of the Population in the Territory of the Russian Federation in Connection with the Spread of a New Coronavirus Infection (COVID-19) dated 2 April, 2020 No. 239*, available at [<https://xn--80aesfpebagmblc0a.xn--p1ai/ai/doc/87/attach/0001202004020025.pdf>].

<sup>14</sup> *Decree of the Mayor of Moscow dated 10 March, 2020 No. 17-UM On Amending the Decree of the Mayor of Moscow dated 5 March, 2020 No. 12-UM; Decree of the Mayor of Moscow dated 14 March, 2020 No. 20-UM On Amending the Decree of the Mayor of Moscow dated 5 March, 2020 No. 12-UM; Decree of the Mayor of Moscow dated 16 March, 2020 No. 21-UM On Amending the Decree of the Mayor of Moscow dated 5 March, 2020 No. 12-UM; Decree of the Mayor of Moscow dated 19 March, 2020 No. 25-UM On Amending the Decree of the Mayor of Moscow dated 5 March, 2020 No. 12-UM; Decree of the Mayor of Moscow dated 23 March, 2020 No. 26-UM On Amending the Decree of the Mayor of Moscow dated 5 March, 2020 No. 12-UM; Decree of the Mayor of Moscow dated 25 March, 2020 No. 28-UM On Amending the Decree of the Mayor*

bars, snack bars and other catering establishments (except for take-out work), retail trade (except for pharmacies, grocery stores and basic necessities), beauty salons, hairdressing salons, massage salons have stopped working. The restrictions were subsequently extended until 1 May, 2020.<sup>15</sup> Since 13 April, 2020, car rental services, taxi services (except for official carriers), construction and repair work have all been suspended.<sup>16</sup> Starting on 15 April, 2020, digital passes were introduced to travel around Moscow.<sup>17</sup>

This wave of restrictions significantly affected the predicament of labor migrants from Central Asian countries—many lost their jobs and were placed on unpaid leave. The owners of taxi companies claim that the demand for taxi services fell by 80-90% due to the introduction of the high alert regime, the self-isolation regime and the pass-only regime.<sup>18</sup> A significant number of migrants lost their jobs in construction, services, trade, restaurant and hotel business, and transport spheres.

The demand for home services, courier delivery, housing and communal services (wipers, disinfectants) and cleaning services has notably grown. For instance, Deputy Mayor of Moscow for Economic Policy and Property and Land Relations Vladimir Efimov estimates a 30.9% turnover increase in wholesale trade and online leisure services in one week (20-24 April, 2020). The average daily volume of wholesale trade during this week amounted to approximately 2.5 billion rubles. For the second week in a row, the online culture, leisure and sports industry has shown the largest growth for the second week in a row. Turnover growth against the previous week equaled 68%. The average daily turnover in this segment during that week equaled about 100 million rubles. For the first time since the introduction of restrictive measures, the average daily retail turnover in foodstuffs increased by 3.7% (2.6 billion rubles) and came out of the negative zone. The total average daily retail turnover of food and non-food goods amounted to 5.1 billion rubles.<sup>19</sup> Undoubtedly, the growth in these sectors of the economy contributed to the employment of some labor migrants who had previously lost their jobs. But this sector could not absorb all the freed workers.

Then, the ban on the operation of restaurants, cafes, hairdressers and other service sector facilities was extended in Moscow until 31 May, 2020. Industrial and construction enterprises started working on 12 May, 2020. The mayor of Moscow stated: “Unlike trade and service workers, con-

*of Moscow dated 5 March, 2020 No. 12-UM*, available at [[https://mosgorzdrav.ru/ru-RU/document/default/search/2/10.html?phrase=&interval=&group\\_id=18](https://mosgorzdrav.ru/ru-RU/document/default/search/2/10.html?phrase=&interval=&group_id=18)].

<sup>15</sup> *Decree of the Mayor of Moscow dated 26 March, 2020 No. 31-UM On Amending the Decree of the Mayor of Moscow dated 5 March, 2020 No. 12-UM; Decree of the Mayor of Moscow dated 2 April, 2020 No. 36-UM On Amending the Decree of the Mayor of Moscow dated 5 March, 2020 No. 12-UM; Decree of the Mayor of Moscow dated 4 April, 2020 No. 39-UM On Amending the Decree of the Mayor of Moscow dated 5 March, 2020 No. 12-UM; Decree of the Mayor of Moscow dated 9 April, 2020 No. 41-UM On Amending the Decree of the Mayor of Moscow dated 5 March, 2020 No. 12-UM*, available at [[https://mosgorzdrav.ru/ru-RU/document/default/search/1/10.html?phrase=&interval=&group\\_id=18](https://mosgorzdrav.ru/ru-RU/document/default/search/1/10.html?phrase=&interval=&group_id=18)].

<sup>16</sup> *Decree of the Mayor of Moscow dated 10 April, 2020 No. 42-UM On Amending the Decree of the Mayor of Moscow dated 5 March, 2020 No. 12-UM*, available at [[https://mosgorzdrav.ru/ru-RU/document/default/search/1/10.html?phrase=&interval=&group\\_id=18](https://mosgorzdrav.ru/ru-RU/document/default/search/1/10.html?phrase=&interval=&group_id=18)].

<sup>17</sup> *Decree of the Mayor of Moscow dated 11 April, 2020 No. 43-UM On Approval of the Procedure for Issuing and Using Digital Passes for Movement on the Territory of the City of Moscow during the Period of High Alert in the City of Moscow; Decree of the Mayor of Moscow dated 18 April, 2020 No. 44-UM On Amending the Decree of the Mayor of Moscow dated 5 March, 2020 No. 12-UM; Decree of the Mayor of Moscow dated 18 April, 2020 No. 45-UM On Amending the Decree of the Mayor of Moscow dated 11 April, 2020 No. 43-UM ; Decree of the Mayor of Moscow dated 21 April, 2020 No. 47-UM On Amending the Decree of the Mayor of Moscow dated 5 March, 2020 No. 12-UM and 11 April, 2020 No. 43-UM ; Decree of the Mayor of Moscow dated 28 April, 2020 No. 51-UM On Amending the Decree of the Mayor of Moscow dated 5 March, 2020 No. 12-UM; Decree of the Mayor of Moscow dated 29 April, 2020 No. 52-UM On Amending the Decree of the Mayor of Moscow dated 4 April, 2020 No. 40-UM and 11 April, 2020 No. 43-UM*, available at [[https://mosgorzdrav.ru/ru-RU/document/default/search/1/10.html?phrase=&interval=&group\\_id=18](https://mosgorzdrav.ru/ru-RU/document/default/search/1/10.html?phrase=&interval=&group_id=18)].

<sup>18</sup> See: [<https://iz.ru/999074/aleksandr-volobuev/ezda-bez-sprosa-stolichnye-taksisty-predupredili-o-riske-razoreniia>].

<sup>19</sup> See: “Ob’em optovoy trgovli v Moskve vyros na 30 protsentov,” Official website of the Mayor of Moscow, 24 April, 2020, available at [<https://www.mos.ru/news/item/73094073/>].



struction workers and employees of industrial enterprises barely ever come in contact with customers. It is much easier to ensure the proper sanitary and epidemiological regime in relatively confined workspaces, i.e., at construction sites and in production halls. Only those workers whose presence in workshops, offices and on construction sites is required for technological reasons will be able to return to their jobs. Construction of roads, schools, kindergartens and other facilities necessary for the city will be resumed.”<sup>20</sup> Deputy Prime Minister of the Russian Federation Marat Khusnullin recommended not to halt work at construction sites that employ migrants and rotational workers. On 24 April, 2020, he said: “We now believe that we do not need the foreign workers who work in our country to move elsewhere. Our share of foreign workers today is quite large ... and, of course, we need them in order to fulfill all the tasks that we are facing.”<sup>21</sup>

The authorities of the Astrakhan region, a border Russian region, announced a shortage of labor migrants in the agricultural-industrial complex, which is associated with the closure of the region’s eastern border with Kazakhstan.<sup>22</sup> Experts say that labor migrants from megacities who lost their jobs during the COVID-19 pandemic began to move to the southern regions of the Russian Federation, including the Astrakhan region, seeking work that would allow them to survive the crisis.<sup>23</sup>

## Key Issues in the Position of Labor Migrants in Russia during the COVID-19 Pandemic: Sociological Survey Results

In April 2020, an online sociological survey was conducted via the official website of the ISPI FCTAS RAS and social networks (Facebook, VKontakte and instant messengers) with the support of Valentina Chupik, a lawyer who provides free services to migrants, NGO Tong Jahoni and the Trade Union of Migrants of Russia.<sup>24</sup> 717 respondents were interviewed to study the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on the position of labor migrants in Russia. Following data cleansing, 671 questionnaires were selected for analysis. The sociological survey sample was random. The average age of the respondents was 36.4 years, the median age equaled 36 years, the minimum age was 19 years, the maximum—65 years, with the standard deviation of 9.27 years. The most numerous age groups of the respondents were 23-30 years old (201 respondents), 31-38 years old (158 respondents) and 39-45 years old (156 respondents). About 61% of respondents were male, 39% were female.

Most of the respondents (labor migrants) are citizens of Central Asian states: 413 people (62%) are citizens of Tajikistan, 92 people (14%) are citizens of Uzbekistan, 67 people (10%) are citizens of Kyrgyzstan, 6 people (1%) are citizens of Kazakhstan, 93 people (14%)—citizens of other countries. While this distribution looks significantly distorted in favor of the citizens of Tajikistan (obvi-

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<sup>20</sup> Decree of the Mayor of Moscow dated 7 May, 2020 No. 55-UM On Amending the Decree of the Mayor of Moscow dated 5 March, 2020 No. 12-UM; Decree of the Mayor of Moscow dated 7 May, 2020 No. 56-UM On Amending the Decree of the Mayor of Moscow dated 4 April, 2020 No. 40-UM and 11 April, 2020 No. 43-UM, available at [<https://www.sobyani.ru/koronavirus-resheniya-07-05-2020>].

<sup>21</sup> See: “Rossiyskim stroykam nuzhny rabochie iz drugikh stran...” Sputnik Uzbekistan, 24 April, 2020, available at [<https://uz.sputniknews.ru/migration/20200424/13993565/Rossiyskim-stroykam-nuzhny-migranty--vitse-premer-RF.html>].

<sup>22</sup> Arbuz Today, available at [<https://arbuztoday.ru/v-astraxanskoj-oblasti-slozhilsya-deficit-rabochej-sily-iz-zakrytiya-granic-dlya-migrantov/>].

<sup>23</sup> Astrakhan News, available at [<https://ast-news.ru/node/v-astrakhanskuyu-oblast-mogut-rvanut-migranty-i-covid-19-iz-moskvy/>].

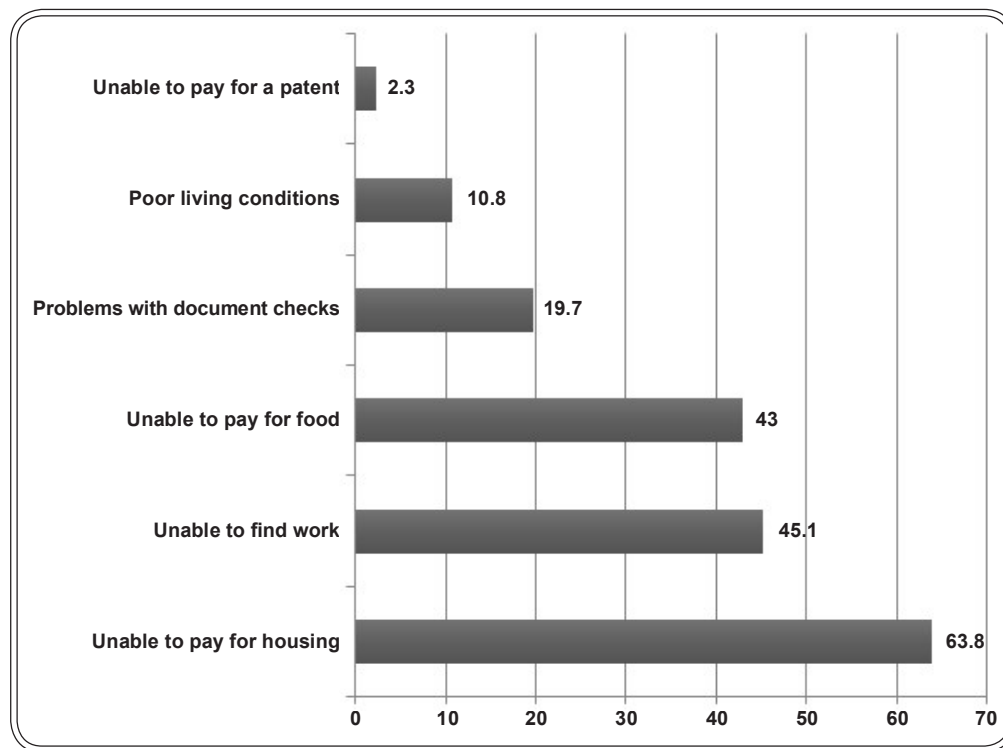
<sup>24</sup> *A Survey of Foreign Citizens (Migrant Workers) in Russia on the Impact of the COVID-19 Pandemic*, available at [<http://xn--h1aauh.xn--p1ai/11882-2/>].

ously due to the greater activity of Tajik citizens on social media, closer ties with these organizations, large-scale job loss in Russia during the pandemic), other socio-demographic parameters of the respondents suggest that the sample is close to the real socio-demographic structure of labor migrants in Russia.

The main issues for labor migrants during the pandemic was the inability to pay for housing (about 64%), the loss of work and inability to find work (45%) and the lack of money for food (43%). About 20% encountered problems with document checks and poor living conditions (11%) and 2% of respondents could not pay for a patent (see Fig. 2).

*Figure 2*

**Key Issues Encountered by Respondents (Labor Migrants) in Russia during the Pandemic, %**

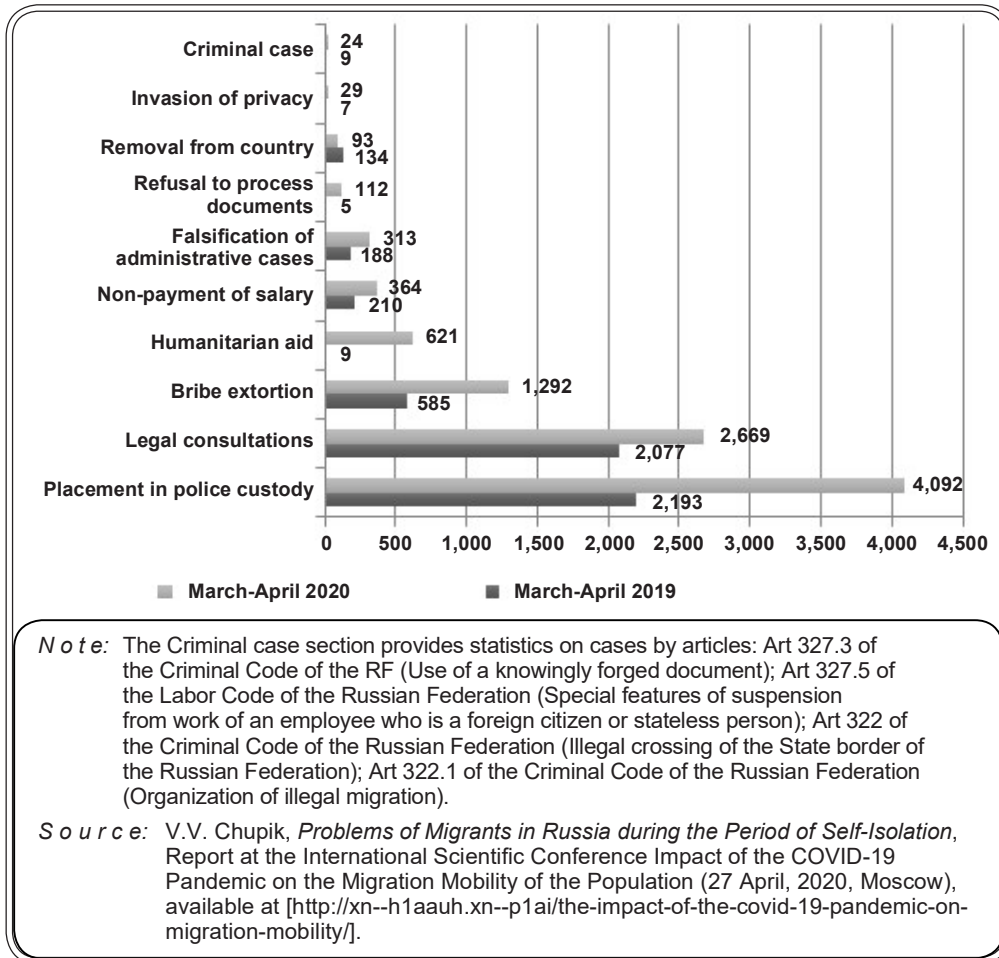


The main reason for the inability to pay for housing and buy food was the loss of income by a significant number of labor migrants: about 28% of the respondents were laid off and did not have a job at the time of the survey, and 37% were placed on unpaid leave. It turns out that 65% of the surveyed labor migrants had no sources of income during the pandemic. As the survey revealed during the COVID-19 pandemic, the overwhelming number of respondents, or 84%, have lost their income, income increased only for 1%, and did not change for 15% of respondents.

The largest reduction in the employment of labor migrants was noted in construction—37% of those who previously worked at construction sites have lost their jobs. The catering sector also shrank significantly: 21% of those who lost their jobs worked in restaurants and cafes. 18% of the laid-off labor migrant worked in trade, i.e., in supermarkets, shops, stalls and kiosks. About 6% of those who

Figure 3

Migrants' Appeals to the Tong Jahoni NGO in March-April 2019 and 2020



lost their jobs were fired from taxi services. Employment in home services (3.5%), industry (3.5%), education (about 2.9%), housing and communal services (2.6%), hairdressers and beauty salons (2.4%), cleaning (1.5%) and tourism (1.1%) also declined. Thus, at the end of April and the beginning of May 2020, the employment of labor migrants decreased by 60%.

Certain Russian experts have come up with a proposal to pay unemployment benefits to labor migrants and provide them with access to medical services. According to the survey results, in April 2020, only 5% received help from their fellow countrymen, 3%—from their employer, 1%—from their country’s embassy, 0.5%—from the Russian authorities. About 87% of respondents did not receive material assistance (money, food, medicine, antiseptics) in April 2020.

To move around the city of Moscow and the Moscow region in April and May 2020, Russian and foreign citizens need to obtain a digital pass with a QR code indicating the purpose of the trip, passport data, the starting and ending points of the trip. Only employers can issue a digital pass for a

migrant worker. A digital pass for personal purposes can only be obtained twice a week.<sup>25</sup> A person must carry identity documents confirming the place of actual residence at a specific address (document of ownership, registration, temporary registration, apartment rental agreement, notification of migration registration).<sup>26</sup> Since 1 June, 2020, the Moscow city authorities have limited daily personal walks.

Due to the above requirements, labor migrants have to face checks by various structures, primarily by the police. At the same time, as noted above, the majority of labor migrants live without registration at their places of residence. Landlords who rent out apartments do not always register their tenants. Labor migrants have to register for a fee at other addresses (in so-called “rubber apartments,” which the authorities are struggling to eliminate) to present the documents in the migration agency. In reality, the unreasonable registration system continues to exacerbate the labor migrants’ predicament and makes them extremely vulnerable to fines and violence from the security forces.

Although the Russian authorities have simplified migration procedures until 15 June, 2020 (registration, patents, work permits, temporary residence permit, visas), in reality, cases of police violence and violations of the rights of labor migrants in Russian cities have only become more numerous. According to Valentina Chupik, with the beginning of the self-isolation regime, the number of foreigners’ reports of illegal detention and extortion of bribes by the police, as well as requests for legal advice at the Tong Jahoni NGO in March-April 2020, increased sharply (by 2 times) compared to 2019 (see Fig. 3).<sup>27</sup>

## *Conclusion*

During the economic downturn in Russia during the COVID-19 pandemic, labor migrants from Central Asian countries were among the most vulnerable social groups, exposed to economic impact and the risk of stigmatization and exclusion. Considering the fact that their employment supported families and relatives at home, contributed to poverty reduction, provided their families with access to basic goods and services, and children—with access to education, the loss of jobs in Russia by migrants led to an increase in poverty in Kyrgyzstan, Uzbekistan, and Tajikistan.

During the pandemic, the Governments of Russia and Central Asian states, civil society, international organizations, public organizations, non-profit and non-governmental organizations need to unite and coordinate efforts in the field of humanitarian aid and information support to labor migrants, synchronizing and coordinating action against COVID-19 internationally.

Although some diplomatic missions, non-governmental organizations and businessmen have organized charitable assistance for migrant workers (money, food, personal hygiene and medicine), assistance is not reaching all the migrants yet. Payment for food and housing remains a tremendously relevant problem for migrants who have lost income.

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<sup>25</sup> *Decree of the Mayor of Moscow On Approval of the Procedure for Issuing and Using Digital Passes for Movement in the Territory of the City of Moscow during the Period of High Alert in the City of Moscow*, available at [<https://www.sobyanin.ru/tsifrovye-propuska-osnovnye-pravila>]; Official website of the Government of the Moscow Region, available at [<https://mosreg.ru/services/popular/kak-poluchit-elektronnyi-propusk-v-podmoskove>

<sup>26</sup> “The Moscow City Duma Explained What Documents You Need to Take with You Now When Going to the Store,” available in Russian at [[https://yandex.ru/news/story/Nazvany\\_obyazatelnye\\_usloviya\\_dlya\\_perevizheniya\\_po\\_Moskve\\_peshkom--2c620e5439b953764399601a27affb4c?lr=213&stid=yZgRu8wp3I-FG\\_6a1Prc&persistent\\_id=94341741&lang=ru&rubric=index&from=story&nar=0](https://yandex.ru/news/story/Nazvany_obyazatelnye_usloviya_dlya_perevizheniya_po_Moskve_peshkom--2c620e5439b953764399601a27affb4c?lr=213&stid=yZgRu8wp3I-FG_6a1Prc&persistent_id=94341741&lang=ru&rubric=index&from=story&nar=0)].

<sup>27</sup> See: V.V. Chupik, *Problems of Migrants in Russia during the Period of Self-Isolation*, Report at the International Scientific Conference *Impact of the COVID-19 Pandemic on the Migration Mobility of the Population (27 April, 2020, Moscow)*, available at [<http://xn--h1aauh.xn--p1ai/the-impact-of-the-covid-19-pandemic-on-migration-mobility/>].

It is necessary to organize the monitoring of the health status of migrant workers in cases of COVID-19 infection. Everyone should be provided with the necessary information on health guidelines and measures related to COVID-19. The dissemination of information must be carried out through social media, via SMS or other instant messengers.

The power structures of Russia need to end the pressure on migrant workers: unreasonable checks, violence, illegal detentions, illegal expulsions, direct extortion of bribes, illegal invasion of privacy, confiscation of passports, falsification of administrative cases, refusals to issue documents.