

Roles flip as Russians become ‘migrant workers’ in Tajikistan (for now)

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For the first time in 30 years, Russians are heading to Central Asia rather than the other way around - to escape war

News about Central Asia usually involves talk of migration. Especially if the country in question is Tajikistan, where one million people - 10% of the population - work as labour migrants in Russia.

But the situation has reversed, at least for now, in the wake of Vladimir Putin’s partial mobilisation of Russian reservists on 21 September. To avoid being called up, hundreds of thousands of Russians are scrambling to leave, and many are heading for Tajikistan.

While Russians have been surprised by the positive reception they’ve found in the Central Asian country, their sudden arrival has provoked different reactions among locals, including some flashbacks.

As Dushanbe filled with Russians, locals reminisced about how the city used to look - before the Soviet collapse and the country’s bloody civil war in the 1990s, after which many Russians left Tajikistan for good. Their departure reshaped the social and political fabric of the country.

Among some older residents of Dushanbe, the newcomers have sparked nostalgia for a more liberal, multinational, predominantly Russian-speaking city. For others, they have reopened long-buried grievances about Soviet-era hierarchies, when Russians occupied privileged positions in society.

Not-so-newcomers

After the invasion of Ukraine, few Russians who decided to move abroad chose Tajikistan as their destination. Instead, they went to Georgia, Armenia or Uzbekistan.

After Putin’s mobilisation announcement, however, they rushed to buy whatever air tickets were still available. By 23 September, no [seats](#) were available for upcoming flights to cities in Tajikistan, and prices had soared fivefold up to \$1,630 for a one-way flight.

While other countries in Eurasia [counted arrivals from Russia](#), the Tajik government released no data. It was only on 14 October, at the Russia-Central Asia summit in Kazakhstan’s capital Astana, that Tajikistan president Emomali Rahmon [mentioned](#) that “30,000, we will not call them refugees, [but] the relocated ones, Russian speakers, came... to us.”

This mass influx is concentrated in Dushanbe, significantly reshaping the capital’s rather homogenous scene. Russian men in their 20s and 30s sporting flip-flops, backpacks and tattoos were everywhere, some with their families. Summer shorts became a frequent object of jokes, given that they’re rarely worn by Tajik men.

However, the new arrivals also brought skyrocketing prices for hotels, apartments, taxis and other services. To rent a one-bedroom flat in the city centre almost [trebled](#) in a matter of days from 3,000 somoni (about £265) a month to 8,000 (just over £700).

While Russians say they have “relocated”, locals tend to refer to them as “guests of the capital” – but also, in a sad twist of irony, using the same derogatory term (*ponaekhavshie*) frequently used in Russia towards labour migrants from Central Asia.

Compassion and hospitality

Many Tajiks feel compassion towards Russians who fled their country to avoid being sent to fight in Ukraine.

“I understand that these are ordinary people. They do not want to kill and be killed,” a young female journalist from Dushanbe told me. Tajik women with adult sons can see the parallel with their own children. One woman in her 50s told me: “I feel sorry for these boys. They also have mothers, and they had to leave them behind. Who knows when, and if, they will be able to go back home?”

This positive attitude towards Russian draft evaders might seem surprising, given the Tajik people’s general [pro-Russian stance](#) even in the face of Russia’s invasion of Ukraine.

These attitudes may also in part be a legacy of the Soviet era. At a roundtable discussion in early October on employment procedures for Russian citizens, I heard the moderator passionately comparing the recent arrivals to, first, the expansion of the Russian Empire and then the establishment of the Soviet Union in Tajikistan.

“One hundred years ago, a similar story happened,” the moderator mused. “The light of Russia came to us.” Later, when a young Russian IT specialist asked whether he could attend any Tajik language courses, the moderator laughed, saying: “It’s better if we use you to teach us Russian instead!”

Sentiments such as these may have their roots in decades of Russian imperial and then Soviet dominance in Tajikistan, which embedded what could be seen as white supremacist attitudes in parts of Tajik society. As one activist told me: “For our people, Russians are a better sort of humans. No one makes a distinction between different political positions within Russia; that some Russians are pro-Putin and those who come here are military deserters. All of them are Russians for us. They are white people.”

This support for Russia manifests itself in several initiatives taken by activists and volunteers in Dushanbe. Social media groups sprang up on Telegram and Facebook as soon as the first Russians started arriving. By mid October, the most popular one, ‘Relocation in Tajikistan’, had more than 4,000 members and nearly 1,000 messages a day.

In these groups, Tajiks reply – in Russian – to questions about accommodation, sim cards, how to register in the country or open a bank account with a Visa card (international financial services have suspended their operations in Russia).

Locals created a [guide](#) to Dushanbe specially for their “Russian friends”, from using public transport to ordering food deliveries. Others have offered to show the city to newcomers or to take them, free of charge, to Khujand in the north or to the Uzbek border. Local media [says](#) that some Dushanbe residents paid for purchases made by Russians in markets and shops, or provided free accommodation in their homes.

These initiatives are presented as acts of hospitality – an important element of Tajik culture. Still,

there is an element of performativity attached. Many people I spoke to felt obliged to show generosity and kindness to Russians. As one professor in her 50s put it to me: “Let the Russians see what kind of people we are. Many of them, when they come here, expect to see a village with donkeys and uneducated people. Let them see how hospitable we are.”

There is also hope that if the newcomers feel welcome in Tajikistan, in the long run this may change [discriminatory attitudes towards Tajik labour migrants](#) in Russia. “If 20,000 Russians come here and each of them tells another ten people how nice we are, imagine what effect this will have on the lives of Tajiks in Russia,” a 35-year-old accountant told me.

Anger

Some Tajiks, especially those with international experience beyond Russia, are resentful about how badly Tajik migrants are treated in Russia compared to the welcome Russians have had in Tajikistan.

“Many here say that Tajiks have some sort of debt towards Russians, and that we need to return it. There is this saying: ‘Russia gives us bread and salt’,” said a researcher in his thirties. “But in reality we do not owe Russia anything; migrants are working hard for low salaries and in bad conditions.”

A 40-year-old development aid worker admitted bluntly: “I will never be hospitable towards Russians because of how they treat us Tajiks. Now that Western countries [have] turned their back on them, they should be grateful that Central Asia let them in.”

In a similar vein, another woman, an official, asked rhetorically: “Maybe all of this happened on purpose, so that Russians are for once in the shoes of migrants?”

Regardless of how they are perceived by locals, Russians seem to like Tajikistan. Telegram chats reveal that they knew nothing about the country before, and are surprised at how safe and beautiful Dushanbe is, with its flower-filled parks, affordable prices (for them, at least) and numerous cafés and restaurants. Still, they do not intend to settle down.

At the roundtable discussion, a Russian doctor complained about how little people earn in Tajikistan, saying that a Tajik doctor’s monthly salary is equivalent to the cost of one private consultation in Novosibirsk (in Siberia). Russian IT workers moan in Telegram chats about how slow and unreliable the internet is, making it impossible for them to work.

Moreover, to find legal employment in the country, Russians need a work permit. This can be issued only through a small number of companies that have a licence to hire foreigners and is very hard to get hold of.

Following exchanges on Telegram and listening to conversations at the airport, I discovered that many Russians are already leaving – for Uzbekistan, or [further afield](#) to India, Turkey, the UAE, even Thailand.

Yet even if Russian migration to Tajikistan is only temporary, it is an interesting moment. For the first time since independence in 1991, it is Russians who are migrating to Tajikistan, rather than the other way round. As one official told me: “Maybe for the last 30 years we had so many of our own problems, and we weaned ourselves so much off Russians, that... we even missed them.”

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