

RUSI PROJECT REPORT

# THE NEXUS BETWEEN CLIMATE CHANGE, LABOUR MIGRATION, AND RADICALISATION AMONG TAJIK LABOUR MIGRANTS

Exploring potential connections

This report was commissioned by the Multinational Development Policy Dialogue of the Konrad-Adenauer-Stiftung, with editing and coordination support from Igor Bryzhatyi and Nicole Linsenbold.

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# Contents

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<b>EXECUTIVE SUMMARY .....</b>	<b>6</b>
<b>1.Introduction.....</b>	<b>8</b>
Two hypotheses on the nexus of climate change, migration and radicalisation .....	8
Methodology .....	9
Map of research locations in Tajikistan .....	10
<b>2. Exploring the Migration Impacts of Climate Change.....</b>	<b>12</b>
2.1 What the science of climate change tells us .....	12
2.2 How climate change impact is mediated by economic and social status .....	14
2.3 Climate change interventions.....	15
2.4 A Country being reshaped by mass migration.....	15
2.5 The migration landscape.....	16
Table 1: Employment in Tajikistan .....	17
2.6 Tajikistan's migration policies.....	18
2.7 Impact of climate change on migration.....	19
2.8 Climate change impact mitigation efforts .....	21
2.9 Climate change perceptions among labour migrants.....	21
<b>3. Exploring the Migration Impacts of Climate Change.....</b>	<b>23</b>
3.1 Background on Radicalisation in Tajikistan.....	23
3.2 Existing prevention measures .....	25
3.3 Are Labour Migrants of Rural Background More Vulnerable to Radicalisation? .....	26
3.3.1 Culture Shock and Social Isolation.....	26
3.3.2 Lower Ability to Earn an Adequate Livelihood.....	29
3.3.3 More Conservative Attitudes .....	29
3.4 Is the Gap between Supply and Demand of Migrant Labour from Tajikistan Growing? .....	30
<b>4. Case Studies Russia and Turkey as Recruitment Grounds for VEOs .....</b>	<b>33</b>
4.1 Culture Shocks .....	33
4.2 Opportunity to Earn an Adequate Livelihood .....	34
4.3 Hostility Towards Migrants .....	34
Table 2: Reasons for return to Tajikistan.....	35
4.4 How VEOs Exploit the Plight of Labour Migrants.....	38
<b>CONCLUSION .....</b>	<b>41</b>
<b>RECOMMENDATIONS.....</b>	<b>42</b>

## Executive summary

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This report examines the interplay between climate change, labour migration, and radicalisation among Tajik labour migrants. As Tajikistan grapples with the dual pressures of environmental degradation and socio-economic challenges, understanding these dynamics has never been more critical.

### **Context and Rationale**

Labour migration from Tajikistan, particularly to Russia and Turkey, has long been a subject of interest. Tajikistan is one of the countries most deeply affected by mass out-migration and its economy is now largely dependent on remittances.

While this is well known, recent changes and emerging focuses of analysis necessitate a revisit to these issues. The shift in climate conditions adds a new layer of complexity to migration trends that have already been adversely impacted by socio-political tensions. Following the Crocus Hall attack in March 2024, in which Tajik nationals were reportedly involved, there has been a marked increase in xenophobia and hostility towards Tajik migrants in Russia. This unique set of challenges makes of Tajikistan a special case even within the Central Asian region.

The emergence of a new migration route via Turkey is another significant change. While Tajik migrants seek to reach Europe, they often settle in Turkey due to either being unable to pay for the final leg of their journey or to being rejected by European border police forces.

### **Findings**

This report is based on a RUSI research project supported by Multinational Development Policy Dialogue (MDPD) of the Konrad-Adenauer-Stiftung (KAS). Our research identifies multiple pathways through which climate change might exacerbate the vulnerabilities of Tajik labour migrants leading to potential radicalisation. The findings indicate that:

1. Tajikistan is among the most affected countries by climate change in Central Asia, impacting agricultural productivity and resulting in heightened migration pressures. Climate change affects Tajik agriculture heavily, even if its impact is diluted over the years. Lack of investment in agricultural infrastructure compounds the impact, forcing most rural households to send at least some family members abroad for earning extra money.
2. Migrants of rural origins are more likely to lack the skills (including language ones) to adapt successfully in their host country. Even if few educated Tajiks work in their area of specialisation, they are better equipped to handle the challenges of migration, including by navigating the host country's legal environment.

3. Excess migration flows (relative to the demand for migrant labour) drive migrants to test new migration routes, sometimes exposing them to new dangers, including the proselytising activities of extremist organisations.
4. New migration routes do not always or even often meet the expectations of Tajik labour migrants, resulting in additional frustration and even greater economic precariousness. This tends to create fertile ground for extremist ideologies.
5. Tajik migrants might be even less prepared for the environment of new host countries than they were for Russia, with the result that their feelings of discrimination and economic exploitation in host countries can make them more vulnerable to radicalisation efforts by extremist organisations.

### **Case Studies**

Comparing the experiences of Russia and Turkey reveals similarities and differences in the challenges that Tajik labour migrants have to face. Harassment and mistreatment by police forces was common to both environments, while the population was more hostile in Russia, not least in the wake of the 1 April 2024 terrorist attack in Moscow, of which Tajik citizens were accused. Finally, the Turkish economy turned out to be much less able than the Russian one of absorbing Tajik labour. Overall, big Turkish cities turned out not to be much less of a culture shock for Tajik migrants than Russian ones.

The findings highlight the significant influence of cultural shocks, economic opportunities, and hostile environments on the experiences of Tajik migrants.

### **Recommendations**

The synthesis of these findings underscores the need for policies that integrate climate adaptation strategies within migration management frameworks to mitigate risks of radicalisation, as well as to better reconcile Tajikistan's dependency on migrant remittances with the needs of labour markets abroad.

Addressing the root causes of migration and radicalisation is essential for promoting stability and security in both Tajikistan and host countries. Continued research is vital to adapt our understanding and responses to the evolving landscape of labour migration, radicalisation and their linkages to climate change, while ensuring that the voices of Tajik migrants remain central in these discussions.

This report aims to serve as a foundation for policymakers, researchers, and stakeholders invested in fostering resilience among Tajik migrants in the context of broader socio-environmental changes.

## 1. Introduction

Labour migration and radicalisation out of Tajikistan are not new topics of research. Several reports have been published in recent years, mostly covering the entire Central Asian region.<sup>1</sup> That wave of studies and research stopped around 2020, at least as far as release in the public domain goes. That alone would warrant an update, but there are also other reasons for a new study.

One is the emergence of a new trend in climate change studies, which so far has been poorly integrated into migration and especially radicalisation studies. Since Tajikistan is a country heavily affected by climate change primarily due to the impact of rising temperatures on its agriculture, a major source of labour migrants and has also produces considerable number of recruits for violent extremist organisations, it makes sense to explore the possible linkages between these three facts. The background to this is the vulnerability represented by a weak economy, incapable to providing a livelihood for an expanding population. The World Bank ranked Tajikistan 147th of 187 countries in terms of PPP GDP per capita in 2024

The other is the fact that Tajikistan's status as the most heavily challenged among the Central Asian countries has been strengthened further by the backlash against Tajik migrants in Russia after the Crocus Hall attack in March 2024, reportedly carried out by four Tajik citizens.<sup>2</sup> Tajik labour migrants might well be worse off than any others, while the Tajik state remains one of the least financially resourceful in the region, while the impact of climate change gradually worsens. The number of jihadists who deployed from Tajikistan to Syria is proportionally higher than from any other Central Asian state. The new Syrian leadership is seeking international integration and distancing itself from its jihadist past, which increases the likelihood of Tajik migrants returning.<sup>3</sup>

This report is intended to scope for new trends in migration and radicalisation, in particular the impact of both climate change and the most recent developments in labour migration on vulnerabilities to violent extremism. In doing so the paper also looks at how attempts to securitise migration are triggered by excess offer of migrant labour and at the same time risk favouring radicalisation.

### Two hypotheses on the nexus of climate change, migration and radicalisation

The paper discusses the impact of climate change on migration and

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1 For example, see International Organization for Migration (IOM), 'Migrant Vulnerabilities and Integration Needs in Central Asia', Executive Summary, 2017; World Bank Group, 'Strengthening Youth Resilience to Radicalization: Evidence from Tajikistan', April 2020. For a review of the debates, see Siniša Vuković and India Boland, 'Expanding the Radicalization Framework: A Case Study of Tajik Migration to Russia', *Asian Perspective*, Volume 46, Number 3, Summer 2022.

2 Laura Gozzi, 'Moscow attack: Central Asian migrants hit by backlash in Russia', BBC News, 27 March 2024, <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-europe-68665896>.

3 On this topic, see Antonio Giustozzi, 'Syria's Central Asian Jihadists: losers or spoilers of the post-Assad settlement?', *RUSI Journal*, forthcoming.

argues that even if hard to quantify exactly, there is clearly an impact. How could additional labour migration from rural areas due to climate change impact radicalisation? Here are two hypotheses that this report seeks to test:

- a. The impact would be highest if labour migrants of rural origins were more vulnerable to radicalisation due to factors such as higher vulnerability to culture shock, lower ability to earn an adequate livelihood, lower educational levels and/or more conservative attitudes. If labour migrants of rural background were more vulnerable to radicalisation than those of urban background, an increase in numbers would produce a higher number of cases of radicalisation, all other factors remaining unchanged.
- b. If the increase in the overall number of labour migrants were to meet a declining labour offer, overall conditions in migration would deteriorate. This, if radicalisation was driven at least in part by social and economic conditions, would result in higher levels of radicalisation.

The report is structured into four sections. The first section explores how climate change impacted on Tajik outmigration. The second section looks at the vulnerabilities to radicalisation, with special attention to any impact of climate change. The third section compares two case studies of migration destinations, Russia and Turkey.

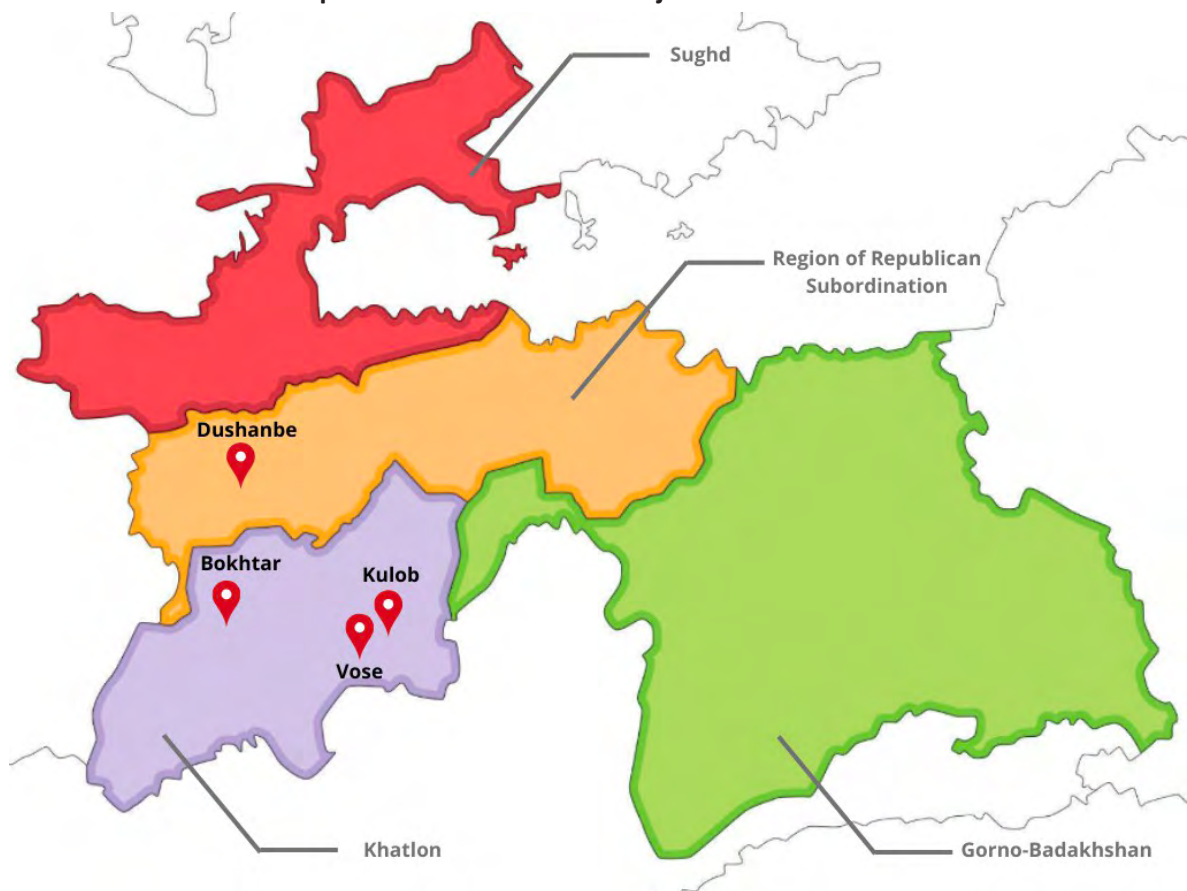
## Methodology

This report relies on the existing literature as well as on interviews carried out specifically for updating knowledge and filling existing gaps. This was a qualitative project, focused on collecting data through semi-structured interviews with labour migrants and free-flowing interviews with key experts. Due to the sensitivities of the project, the researchers were instructed to keep the complete anonymity of the interviewees and to avoid pushing when answers were denied, or when individuals rejected being interviewed. The research methodology was cleared by RUSI's ethical board after a robust review process. RUSI has SEAH ([Safeguarding from Sexual Exploitation, Abuse, and Harassment](#)) policies in place that ensure necessary protections for categories of vulnerable research subjects.

Design decisions for data collection were influenced by the practicalities of the project. For example, the government's disinclination to have extensive interviewing done in Tajikistan did not allow for a survey on these topics to be carried out at the time of the project. Targeted sampling was used to work within the limited time and budgetary scope of the project, which also only allowed for a relatively small number of interviews. Additionally, interviews had to be carried out in precarious conditions, rarely allowing for extended interviews. For these reasons, the project was designed as a scoping exercise.

Between March and May 2025, the RUSI project team deployed a team of four researchers within Tajikistan and tasked one researcher to carry out interviews with Tajik labour migrants in Turkey. The team in Tajikistan conducted 63 interviews with migrants and experts in Dushanbe, Vose, Bokhtar and Kulob. Of the labour migrant respondents in Tajikistan, 28.6% were women and 52% were under 35 years old, reflecting the country's young population. We conducted the majority (23) of the interviews in Dushanbe, as well as 13 in Bokhtar, 13 in Vose and 14 in Kulob, all part of Khatlon oblast. As the intent was to have a balanced urban-rural sample, Dushanbe was selected as the most urban environment in Tajikistan, while Khatlon was chosen as a rural area characterised by high levels of migration and by high level of impact of climate change, as well as for his relative accessibility compared to alternative locations. Of the respondents, 39 were returning or visiting migrants, 19 were academic or NGO experts working on migration, climate, security and/or civil society, 4 were Tajik government officials and one was a cleric. Respondents represented different age groups, marital statuses and professional experiences, which made it possible to cover a wide range of migration trajectories and problems. Much of the fieldwork was conducted during Ramadan. This is a time when many Tajik migrants return to their home country, allowing us to interview them.

**Map of research locations in Tajikistan**



The researchers were issued with different questionnaires (one for rural dwellers, one for urban dwellers and bespoke ones for experts and

officials). The interviews with labour migrants lasted from a few minutes to over one hour each, depending on the availability of interviewees. Many of the approached individuals rejected being interviewed and several of those who accepted talking cut the interview short or avoided answering multiple questions. Questions about the activities of VEOs (Violent Extremist Organisation) and about the radicalization of individuals were the ones with the highest levels of rejections. This was expected and the research team planned to carry out interviews with Tajik labour migrants in Turkey in part to specifically obviate to this expected lack of detailed information on extremism and in part to allow for a comparison of two very different migration environments (see below). The labour migrant individuals were approached mostly at iftar gatherings, the fast-breaking meal when many families and friends get together during Ramadan. Others were approached through personal contacts of the research team and new interviewees were then found through a snowballing technique.

As mentioned already, we expected that Tajik labour migrants in Turkey would be more open to talking about radicalisation and VEO recruitment than those in Tajikistan. This proved to be a correct assumption. The researcher in Turkey conducted 10 interviews with Tajik migrants in Istanbul and Izmir, the two main centres of Tajik migration. All of the interviewees were males. Nine out of ten of them had to settle in Turkey while trying to reach Europe, as they stated explicitly in their interviews. The interviewees were identified through existing contacts among the Tajik diaspora in Turkey. Five of the interviewees had previous experience of migration to Russia, while the others were first-time migrants who had relatives or friends who had been to Russia for work with whom they had discussed living in Russia.

Another seven interviews with experts and practitioners were conducted by the report's author remotely, mostly with experts not based in Tajikistan. In total, therefore, 80 interviews were carried out for the project.

The breakdown of the 27 labour migrant interviewees who provided details of their employment in the host country is 15% construction, 52% trade and services, 26% transport and storage, 4% unskilled and 4% agriculture. For comparison, see employment data about Tajiks abroad in 2.5. The discrepancies in the construction and trade and services sectors stand out. Given that the project interviewees included many who had left Russia for good, it may be assumed that the construction sector was less affected than the more volatile services sector by the exodus on Tajik workers in 2024.

## 2. Exploring the Migration Impacts of Climate Change

This section discusses what we know about climate change in Tajikistan and of its impact on migration, including the existing literature, the views of the experts interviewed for the project, and the perceptions of the migrants themselves.

### 2.1 What the science of climate change tells us

The understanding and knowledge of climate change in Tajikistan is limited.<sup>4</sup> After the collapse of the USSR, climatic data has been scarce, hence the effect of climatic change is uncertain.<sup>5</sup> As UNCCD acknowledges, “the direct connections between migration, land degradation and climate change cannot be definitively established”, due to land degradation being affected by both climate change and socioeconomic factors. What directly impacts on migration decision-making are always socio-economic factors, such as “declines in aggregate income, unemployment, increased social discontent, and sanitary and epidemiological problems”.<sup>6</sup>

That said, the generally accepted scientific consensus for Central Asia as a whole is that aridity is increasing and that glaciers are melting.<sup>7</sup> In Tajikistan, however, local perceptions often diverge radically: farmers and villagers are adamant that the temperature has risen by several degrees over the decades and it rains more.<sup>8</sup> In 2019, ICARDA valued the impact of “land degradation-induced damages on infrastructure” at 0.82%, on loss of woody biomass at 0.55% and the deriving natural disasters at 0.35% of GDP.<sup>9</sup> The World Bank estimated the impact of natural disasters in 2011-16 at 0.4% of GDP annually and the total cost of land degradation at between 8.1-13.4% of GDP annually.<sup>10</sup> The World Bank estimates that 29,800 Tajiks are displaced annually by natural disasters.<sup>11</sup>

According to a statement by a representative of the Executive Authority of the State Authority of the Khatlon Region, “the region plays a key role in the agricultural sector of Tajikistan.”<sup>12</sup> An official working for the Committee for Emergency Situations noted that in the towns of Bokhtar and Kulyab, in Vose district and other areas of the Khatlon region, “every year, familiar seasonal phenomena become more destructive”.<sup>13</sup> Overall government officials identified the following climate change trends:

4 *Perception, Interpretation and Managing of Climate Change and Related Natural Hazards in Tajikistan*, Dissertation submitted at the Faculty of Humanities at the University of Bern to obtain the degree of Doctor of Philosophy by Béatrice Zimmermann, Basel 2016.

5 Suzy Blondin, ‘Environmental migrations in Central Asia: a multifaceted approach to the issue’, *Central Asian Survey*, 2018, 4.

6 UNCCD, ‘The Nexus Between Land Degradation Climate Change, and Migration in Central Asia’, Bonn, 2022, 29.

7 Suzy Blondin, cit.

8 Béatrice Zimmermann, *Perception, Interpretation and Managing of Climate Change and Related Natural Hazards in Tajikistan*, PhD Dissertation, University of Bern, 2016, 76-77.

9 ‘Estimating costs of environmental degradation in the mountains of Tajikistan’, Tashkent : ICARDA, 2019.

10 ‘Cost of environmental degradation in the mountains of Tajikistan’, Washington : The World Bank, 2020, 19.

11 ‘Tajikistan. Taking a Socially Inclusive Approach to Climate Change’, World Bank, n.d.

12 Respondent 1, representative of the Executive Authority of the State Authority of the Khatlon Region, Bohtar, March 2025.

13 Respondent 12 - Representative of the Committee for Emergency Situations of the Republic of Tajikistan, April 2025.

- a. In spring and autumn, heavy rains, mudflows, landslides and strong gusts of wind, which used to simply fill the rivers, now often lead to catastrophic floods.
- b. At the same time, summer droughts become longer and more intense, literally burning out crops. Residents of remote villages in mountainous areas, where the effects of climate change are felt most acutely, are especially vulnerable.
- c. In recent years large mudflows, gusty winds and torrential rains occurred in various regions of the republic almost monthly (and sometimes weekly), and with increasing intensity.
- d. If in the early 1990s only 2-3 cases of sand and dust storms (the so-called Afghan) per year were registered throughout the republic, then in the last few years their frequency has increased to 40 cases annually. In fact, every 4-5 days, especially, residents of the southern and central, as well as western regions of the republic find themselves in the grip of dusty weather. The dust storms also affect Dushanbe, where they compound the effects of pollution smog.
- e. Of particular concern is the rapid shrinkage of glaciers, the main sources of fresh water. According to monitoring by the Emergency Situations Committee, the volume of glaciers in the Pamir region has decreased by 25-30% over the past 30 years.<sup>14</sup>
- f. Locust invasions, droughts, landslides and torrential rains, aggravated by global warming.<sup>15</sup>
- g. Spring now comes earlier, bringing with it extremely hot, dry and dusty storms in the summer.
- h. Autumn drags on, prolonging the period of smog. Even the winds traditional for the region no longer clean the air, but bring new portions of dust from the dried-out territories.<sup>16</sup>
- i. Shifting the timing of peak river runoff values may pose a threat to irrigated agriculture, in particular for cotton and rice growing.
- j. Heat waves and variability in precipitation can reduce the yield of wheat and other crops and contribute to the spread of pests and diseases.
- k. The number of extreme weather events is also increasing.<sup>17</sup>

*A striking example was the events in the spring of 2024, when residents of Vose and Kulob lost a significant part of their land plots due to extreme rainfall and mudflows, landslides.<sup>18</sup>*

All these have a devastating impact on the region's agriculture, leading to land degradation, reduced crop yields (cotton, wheat, fruit) and an increased risk of extreme weather conditions. Mudflows destroy fertile

<sup>14</sup> Respondent 12 - Representative of the Committee for Emergency Situations of the Republic of Tajikistan, April 2025.

<sup>15</sup> Respondent 1, representative of the Executive Authority of the State Authority of the Khatlon Region, Bokhtar, March 2025.

<sup>16</sup> Respondent 19 - Environmental expert and civil activist, Dushanbe, April 2025.

<sup>17</sup> Respondent 20 - senior consultant of NGO, Dushanbe, April 2025.

<sup>18</sup> Respondent 12 - representative of the Committee for Emergency Situations of the Republic of Tajikistan, April 2025.

lands, livestock is lost to drought. As a result of climate change and more frequent natural disasters, many residents of Khatlon region are losing the opportunity to earn money from traditional activities such as agriculture and livestock breeding. This forces them to look for alternative sources of income, which leads to an increase in labour migration.<sup>19</sup> The impact is magnified by the fact that although agriculture accounts for only 23% of GDP, 71% of the population lives in rural areas and 60% is employed in the agricultural sector, according to the World Bank.

## 2.2 How climate change impact is mediated by economic and social status

The impact of climate change is also obscured by the fact that it impacts on an already dire economic situation in Tajikistan and compounds it, further reducing the profitability of farming, forcing households to diversify their sources of income. This usually implies migration to a city, and very often abroad, given the limited ability of Tajik cities to absorb the extra workforce.<sup>20</sup> Indeed, a Tajik official noted that climate change is not the only reason for migration. Migration is caused by a whole complex of economic and social reasons. Therefore, the main factors directly impacting remain economic difficulties and the lack of prospects for young people.<sup>21</sup> An INGO expert described climate change as an important additional stimulus.<sup>22</sup>

Experts see the impact of climate change as gradually aggravating. An INGO expert explained that climate change is becoming an increasingly decisive factor in migration decisions from rural areas in Tajikistan, especially in regions dependent on agriculture and pasture. Droughts, declining water availability, and erratic precipitation patterns have reduced agricultural productivity, undermining local livelihoods, particularly in Khatlon and in Soghd. Decreased glacial melt, delayed spring runoff, and soil degradation reduce planting reliability and yields, especially for water-intensive crops like cotton and rice. However, he elaborated, climate alone rarely causes migration. It interacts with other drivers – poverty and unemployment – to shape household strategies. Many poor households see youth migration as the only options available to make up for the difference. In particular, male migration often precedes female migration as a way to stabilize household income during environmental stress. For women, the burden increases as they manage land, livestock, and household duties alone. Some consider migration themselves, particularly widows or wives of long-term migrants. Gendered climate vulnerability makes women more dependent on remittances but also more exposed to risk when those fail. They also shoulder more responsibility in agriculture and water collection, but lack access to credit or land to adapt locally and have

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19 Respondent 1, representative of the Executive Authority of the State Authority of the Khatlon Region, Bokhtar, March 2025.

20 Interview with respondent 51, INGO environmental activist and independent human rights expert, Dushanbe, April 2025.

21 Respondent 12 - representative of the Committee for Emergency Situations of the Republic of Tajikistan, April 2025.

22 Respondent 21 - INGO employee, political scientist, civil activist and independent expert on security, migration and human rights, Location: Dushanbe, April 2025.

limited involvement in formal water governance structures.<sup>23</sup>

Climate change means declining vegetable yields and reduced pasture land or rising feed prices. The average income from a personal subsidiary farm rarely exceeds \$100–120 per month, which is not enough to meet even the basic needs of a family of 5–6 people. Migration is one option for adapting to this changing environment, alongside combining farming with craft or with seasonal migration to Dushanbe.<sup>24</sup>

## 2.3 Climate change interventions

The World Bank assesses that while the Tajik government is committed to a green transition towards renewable energy, focused primarily on adding more hydro power generation, it has not quite invested enough resources to achieve it. Without further interventions, including in repairing water distribution infrastructure and in incorporating digital information management, the World Bank estimates that by 2050 climate change could reduce Tajik GDP by 5–6% due to increased impact of natural disasters and loss of livestock, and push an additional 100,000 Tajiks into poverty. The World Bank believes Tajikistan should carry out reforms that would allow mobilising private capital for further investments into the green economy to offset these losses.<sup>25</sup> The ODI also pointed out the legal and regulatory frameworks which constrain private investment in the development of renewable energy.<sup>26</sup>

The UNDP noted the low grade of awareness among the public and government officials of the need for climate adaptation, as well as the persistently limited ability to collect, process and disseminate hydrological and meteorological data and information. Government officials are noted to have “limited knowledge and skills” to work on climate change issues and there is insufficient funding to implement and monitor adaptation projects and programmes.<sup>27</sup>

## 2.4 A Country being reshaped by mass migration

Tajikistan is one of the few countries in the world where the share of urban population has declined over the last half century, although there was a slight recovery from 2020 onwards. From its peak of 37% in 1970, of the 10.4 million Tajik citizens (2023), 28% were classified as “urban” by the UN (2023). This was initially due to significantly higher natural rates of growth in the rural areas and to insufficient investment in the (predominantly urban-based) industrial and service sectors. In the 1990s, the civil war drove out most of the ethnic Russian population, which had been concentrated in Dushanbe.

23 Respondent 51 - INGO employee, civil and environmental activist and independent human rights expert, Dushanbe, April 2025.

24 Respondent 11- Independent expert and employee of a local NGO in Khatlon region on labor migration issues, April 2025.

25 ‘Tajikistan Country Climate and Development Report’, World Bank, 2025.

26 Sarah Opitz-Stapleton et al., ‘Understanding the climate and net-zero transition risks and opportunities in Tajikistan’, London : ODI, December 2022.

27 ‘National Adaptation Plans in focus: Lessons from Tajikistan’, UNDP, 2019.

Thus Tajikistan, on top of the underlying stagnation of the late Soviet period, faced a double crisis in the 1990s, the post-Soviet transition and the civil war (1992-97). To survive, millions of its citizens went to seek employment abroad, chiefly Russia. The growing reliance of remittances from labour migrants also undermines one of the main drivers of urbanisation, that is seeking jobs in the city. As the cost of living is much higher in Dushanbe, households that rely on remittances are better off staying in their village or small town.

The impact of remittances is even more obvious when we look at GDP data. According to the World Bank, the average income was \$4,963 (PPP) in 2023, against a global average of \$22,850. Agriculture accounted for 22.9% of GDP in 2022, vs. 15% of manufacturing. Importantly, the World Bank estimated remittances from labour migrants at 38.4% of GDP in 2023, the second highest rate in the world after the island of Tonga, in the Pacific. Tajikistan is therefore a country shaped more and more deeply by labour migration. At least 40% of households have a family member working abroad.<sup>28</sup> Despite being a conservative society, with relatively large families (six members on average), according to the World Bank 23% of household were classified as female led as of 2021, largely due to male migrants cutting ties with their families in Tajikistan.

## 2.5 The migration landscape

Statistics about Tajikistan's outmigration are not entirely reliable due to the large number of migrants residing illegally in their host country. The Russian authorities put the number of Tajik migrants there at 1,231,500 in September 2024.<sup>29</sup> It should also be noted that Tajik government data, based on surveying Tajiks who travel to Russia, show consistently higher numbers of labour migrants entering Russia.<sup>30</sup> This might be in part explained by the fact that every year many Tajiks obtain Russian citizenship and therefore are no longer counted as immigrants (over 341,000 in 2021-23).<sup>31</sup> According to a source in a local NGO, Khatlon region now ranks first among the regions of Tajikistan in terms of the number of labour migrants, accounting for about 30–32% of the total.

There is no data concerning the number of Tajik migrants in Turkey. Kazakhstan is currently another main destination for Tajik labour migrants, with 969,864 entering the country in 2024 alone.<sup>32</sup> Other minor destinations include South Korea and Europe.

In 2023 an IOM survey found that 36% of Tajik labour migrants were employed in the construction sector, 21% in community, social and personal services, 11% in wholesale and retail trade and 9% in transport, storage and communications.<sup>33</sup> AJICA survey dated 2018 split interviewees

28 'Closure of the Empowering 'Families Left Behind' project in Tajikistan: A Journey of Progress and Future Initiatives', IOM Tajikistan, 4 November 2023.

29 'Tajikistan migration situation report July-August 2024', Dushanbe : IOM, 2025.

30 'More than 3 million Tajik citizens reportedly officially registered in Russia last year', *AsiaPlus*, 14 February 2022.

31 'Number of Tajiks seeking to get Russian citizenship growing fast', Eurasianet, 10 February 2023.

32 'Tajikistan migration situation report July-August 2024', Dushanbe : IOM, 2025.

33 Saodat Olimova and Igor Bosc, 'Labour migration from Tajikistan', IOM, July 2003, 31.

between current migrants and returned migrants, which shows interesting trends:<sup>34</sup>

**Table 1: Employment in Tajikistan**

Sectors of current employment (ages of 16+)	Current migrants (n=879)	Returned migrants (n=400)
Construction	47.20%	27.30%
Transport and communication	5.00%	8.70%
Agriculture and fishery	3.30%	19.20%
Trade and services	20.50%	22.00%
Others and don't know	24.00%	22.80%

This shows how the construction sector is better at retaining Tajik labour than other sectors, so that individuals surveyed in Tajikistan were much less likely to report having worked in constructions. The comparison of the IOM's and JICA's diverging findings also shows how problematic it is surveying an essentially unmapped universe of Tajik labour migrants.

According to JICA, most migrant workers (85.5%) had no skills training before departing. A majority (86%) also relied on friends and relatives when applying for employment. Most migrants also have nearly zero legal literacy.<sup>35</sup>

Young people, especially unskilled workers, are the most likely to become migrants. The aim might be improving the financial situation of the family or maintaining/improving social status and also avoiding conscription. In Tajikistan, all men aged 18-27 are liable for 2 years of military service. Serving in the army is very unpopular with young Tajiks and many prefer to move abroad before they are due, as this avoids criminal charges (up to 5 years of detention) being brought against them.<sup>36</sup> NGO estimates for Khatlon, provided in one of the interviews, are that young people aged 18-35 account for 50-60% of the total number of migrants. Another 35-40% are aged 36-55. The source also reports an increase in the share of family members following the breadwinner in migration, although without providing specific numbers or periods. The source also notes that, in some rural areas, residents sell their houses and move permanently to cities and regions of the Russian Federation.<sup>37</sup> Another NGO source put at 16% the share of women among labour migrants, up from 11% 10 years earlier.<sup>38</sup> This trend indicates significant social and economic changes

<sup>34</sup> 'Migration, living conditions and skills: Panel Study - Tajikistan, 2018', Tokyo : JICA, 2019, 28.

<sup>35</sup> 'Migration, living conditions and skills: Panel Study - Tajikistan, 2018', Tokyo : JICA, 2019, 15.

<sup>36</sup> Interview with respondent 49, human rights lawyer, Dushanbe, April 2025; Interview with respondent 24, teacher, blogger and civil activist, Kulob, April 2025; interview with respondent 39, official at the Committee on Women and Family Affairs, April 2025. See also Farangis Najibullah, 'Uncle Samad wants you! Tajikistan taking extreme measures to get recruits amid failed army draft', RFE/RL, 15 December 2022; 'More than 100 men of draft age prosecuted in Tajikistan last year for refusing to serve in military', Asia Plus, 29 March 2023; 'Recruitment in the Tajik army: a headache for the authorities and hell for the recruits', Novastan, 30 April 2023.

<sup>37</sup> Interview with respondent 2, head of local NGO, Bokhtar, March 2025.

<sup>38</sup> Interview with respondent 61, NGO representative, Dushanbe, May 2025.

taking place in the region and reflects the desire of people to find more stable living conditions outside the country. According to the World Bank, about 60% of migrants from Tajikistan to Russia in 2024 were unemployed before leaving.<sup>39</sup>

## 2.6 Tajikistan's migration policies

The Tajik government seeks to maintain bilateral migration agreements with the main destination countries, although there was friction with Russia in 2024 following the Crocus Hall attack crackdown on illegal migration.<sup>40</sup> The prevention of illegal migration has always been a sore point and in 2024, after the Crocus Hall attack, Russia implemented a major crackdown. Recognising the vulnerability of illegal residents, the Tajik Ministry of Labour has started providing support to the 120,000 migrants listed by Russia as in breach of rules.<sup>41</sup>

Tajikistan's Migration Service is responsible for helping to protect the rights, freedoms and lawful interests of citizens of Tajikistan working abroad. The Representation of the Ministry of Labour, Migration and Employment of the Population in the Russian Federation provides advice and support to labour migrants from Tajikistan, and is responsible for the protection of their rights in the Russian Federation. According to the Law on Migration (1999), the Tajik government facilitates the migration of citizens who wish to work overseas only to countries where their rights are protected. Article 8 of the Law specifically guarantees the protection of nationals' rights as migrant workers abroad.<sup>42</sup> The Tajik government has in fact raised issues at time with the Russian government about the treatment of its citizens.

However, in practice, labour migrants face major problems, including lack of access to information, lack of skills training opportunities and the high cost of migration (including expensive Tajik passports and expensive paperwork in Russia). As of 2020, nearly all migrants depended on informal networks for predeparture information and overseas employment.<sup>43</sup> The Ministry of Labour claims to be currently briefing 60–70% of those travelling abroad for work.<sup>44</sup> The Ministry of Labour now also offers language training to prospective labour migrants.<sup>45</sup>

There is also a shortage of Ministry of Labor, Migration and Employment representatives to aid migrants and limited access to legal remedies in the Russian Federation.<sup>46</sup> The Tajik Ministry of Labour has now set up mobile teams of social workers to assist Tajik women abroad.<sup>47</sup>

39 World Bank: Tajikistan leads in remittance share of the economy', *Asia Plus*, 11 March 2025.

40 Lucy Papachristou and Nazarali Pirnazarov, 'Russia's clampdown on Tajik migrants raises economic and security risks', Reuters, 17 December 2024.

41 Interview with respondent 62, high-ranking official in the Ministry of Labour, Migration and Employment, May 2025.

42 'Republic of Tajikistan Profile 2021: Migration governance indicators', IOM, 2021, 13.

43 'Strengthening support for labor migration in Tajikistan', ADB, December 2020.

44 Interview with respondent 62, high-ranking official in the Ministry of Labour, Migration and Employment, May 2025. RUSI was not able to verify this claimed percentage, which seems high.

45 Interview with respondent 62, high-ranking official in the Ministry of Labour, Migration and Employment, May 2025.

46 'Strengthening support for labor migration in Tajikistan', ADB, December 2020.

47 Interview with respondent 62, high-ranking official in the Ministry of Labour, Migration and Employment, May 2025.

## 2.7 Impact of climate change on migration

Based on the wider academic literature, it is assumed that since outmigration is one of several adaptation strategies for diversifying incomes and securing livelihoods, environmental change too leads to outmigration. This, with the proviso that the affected households might face a number of hurdles, restraining their ability to seek employment abroad (such as the costs of moving to Russia or the need to look after their elders).<sup>48</sup> Actual hard evidence of the link between migration and climate change is scant in the literature, however. Murakami produced some evidence that migration increases after natural disasters, but with a lag. The measurable increase in temperature is however a modest 0.2-1.2 degrees.<sup>49</sup> Displacement due to natural disasters, primarily floods, is recorded to reach a few thousands per year.<sup>50</sup> Land degradation is extensive but harder to quantify, and it is only in part due to climate change. The impact is compounded by the fact that resettlement sometimes takes place in locations where people “did not feel safe or could not be involved in any work or activity”.<sup>51</sup> This shows how the impact of climate change is largely entangled with non-natural factors. Similarly, mud floods are becoming more frequent, but this is also at least in part due to drainages being poorly maintained.<sup>52</sup> Indeed, in the course of a 2012 IOM study

*the majority of the respondents appreciated an ecological situation and the environment as the environment of an anthropogenic nature by assessing the level of sanitation, water supply, and public utility services available in their settlements. Only one third of the respondents of POP-1 suggested that the environment involves the condition of the earth, water, atmosphere, etc.*<sup>53</sup>

In that survey, the 1,050 respondents cited as a cause of a decision to migrate climate change-related factors (impossibility to earn due to degrading environment, no water or drought, poor soil, natural disasters, slowly degrading environment, poor water quality, diseases cause by the environment) a total of 510 times (equivalent to 14.6% of all responses). Other, non-climate change related factors were cited a total of 2,991 times. One should note that the climate change-related factors mentioned can also have non-natural causes or be due to demographic growth.<sup>54</sup> Olimova and Olimov concluded in 2012 that

*with climate aridization and soil degradation, environmental factors will continue to affect the lives of the people [...]. People are no longer interested in land cultivation, as a land plot brings losses rather than profits. This changes migration pattern caused by environmental changes, such as aridization, and the*

48 Suzy Blondin, cit.

49 Enerelt Murakami, ‘Climate change and international migration: Evidence from Tajikistan’, ADBI Working Paper Series, No. 1210, Tokyo : Asian Development Bank Institute (ADBI), 2020.

50 C. Scissa and S.F. Martin, ‘Migration in the Context of Climate and Environmental Changes within Central Asia and to the European Union and the Russian Federation’, International Organization for Migration (IOM), Geneva, 2024, 51.

51 Scissa, and Martin cit., 52.

52 Zimmermann, cit., 76-77.

53 Saodat Olimova and Muzaffar Olimov, ‘Environmental Degradation, Migration, Internal Displacement, and Rural Vulnerabilities in Tajikistan’, IOM, May 2012, 14.

54 Extrapolation from Olimova and Alimov, cit., 11, 30-31.

*increasing irregularity of precipitation restricts the opportunities for seasonal work. The economy of labour migration in Tajikistan as it developed is no longer effective, because it does not act as the second part of the economy – the agricultural economy in the home country. [...] Land degradation, including soil degradation, affect the sustainability of rural production systems and deprive villagers of livelihoods, causing the outflow of rural population as soon as the threshold or breaking point is reached.<sup>55</sup>*

The experts interviewed for this study confirmed that climate change has become one of the key factors forcing people to leave their homes, even if climate change is not the only reason for migration. An NGO expert noted that

*According to our surveys, on average, small farms (equating to the average family in a rural area) can provide about 70% of their needs, including obtaining quality education, medicine and so on. Everything else has to be obtained from labour migration.<sup>56</sup>*

At least two of the Tajik officials interviewed accepted that climate change has become one of the key factors forcing people to leave their native places. When a family loses its harvest for several years in a row due to drought, torrential rains, mudflows or landslides, when the land that used to feed them stops bringing in sufficient income, people simply have no choice. They are forced to look for opportunities to feed their families in other places. The only way out is often sending relatives to work.<sup>57</sup>

Experts and officials converge in assessing that the groups most likely to be forced into climate-induced migration are members of poor families, rain-fed farmers and female heads of households (who can't rely on multiple salaries in the family and cannot diversify sources of income), while the elderly and children suffer the consequences, being left behind, albeit typically with the help of remittances. Limited access to resources, lack of alternative sources of income and limited adaptive capacity make them particularly susceptible to the negative impacts of climate change and increase the likelihood of forced migration.<sup>58</sup> Some interviews with labour migrants show how household survival strategies become gendered. Men tend to resort to labour migration, while women try to find alternative sources of income in rural areas, such as making and selling handicrafts or small-scale trading. They also play an important role in resource management and adaptation to new climatic conditions at the local level.<sup>59</sup>

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55 Olimova and Olimov, cit., 43.

56 Interview with respondent 21, international non-governmental organisation (INGO) expert on security, migration and human rights, Dushanbe, April 2025.

57 Respondent 12 - representative of the Committee for Emergency Situations of the Republic of Tajikistan, April 2025; interview with respondent 39, official at the Committee on Women and Family Affairs, April 2025.

58 Interview with respondent 25, INGO expert in social work and gender advocacy, Dushanbe, April 2025; interview with respondent 39, official at the Committee on Women and Family Affairs, April 2025.

59 Interview with respondent 25, INGO expert in social work and gender advocacy, Dushanbe, April 2025; interview with respondent 39, official at the Committee on Women and Family Affairs, April 2025.

## 2.8 Climate change impact mitigation efforts

The Tajik government's National Strategy for Adaptation to Climate Change (2019) and the National Adaptation Plan (still under development) are meant to highlight a path towards mitigating the impact of climate change. According to the IOM, the Tajik government's mitigation measures have been focused on managing displacement caused by national disasters and land degradation, in particular planned relocation of affected populations to safer places. Environmental migration is narrowly defined as relocation of families affected by the most, but despite this disaster displacement and relocation processes are poorly monitored. There is also poor coordination among government departments.<sup>60</sup>

UN-led programmes have reportedly allowed "67,000 vulnerable people to access sustainable solutions, including climate-resilient farming tools, greenhouses, and irrigation systems" and their on-going efforts to establish a natural disaster early warning system.<sup>61</sup> The wider impact of climate change (reduced farming productivity) is compounded by the poor state of irrigation systems, which were neglected after the transition to private landholding in the 1990s. The Tajik irrigation's efficiency was only 30% in 2017.<sup>62</sup> Efforts to rehabilitate the country's irrigation infrastructure started in the 1990s and did allow for increased productivity in subsequent years. There are currently World Bank- and EU-supported efforts to continue and intensify the rehabilitation effort. USAID was also investing heavily in the improvement of irrigation infrastructure, until the suspension of its programmes in early 2025.

## 2.9 Climate change perceptions among labour migrants

Interestingly, the labour migrants did not link climate change with radicalisation in the interviews. The link between climate change and migration, discussed above, did not really show in the interviews with labour migrants. In part, this might be due to the methodology adopted - in-depth or ethnographic interviewing might have yielded different results, but the conditions on the ground did not allow for that. Only 12 out of 38 interviewed in Tajikistan stated they were aware of the impact of climate change in their area (of which nine were from Khatlon), but only two acknowledged that climate change contributed directly to their decision to migrate and one of them only in combination with various other factors. One more said that he now thinks ex post it was a factor, and another that it was a factor in him deciding not to go back to his farm after he migrated.<sup>63</sup> It should be added that only these four interviewees were active in farming before travelling abroad for work, suggesting that farmers do recognise the effects of climate change as they experience it first-hand. The majority of the other labour migrants interviewed would

60 L.M. Gampp, 'Policy Analysis on Migration, Environment and Climate Change: Tajikistan', Dushanbe: IOM, 2022.

61 'Tajikistan: A Unified Approach to Tackling Climate Risks', UN-DCO, 17 February 2025.

62 'Tajikistan: General Water Security Assessment', World Bank, n.d.; Stefanos Xenarios, Murodbek Laldjebaev & Ronan Shenhav, 'Agricultural water and energy management in Tajikistan: a new opportunity', *International Journal of Water Resources Development*, Volume 37, 2021 - Issue 1, 118-136.

63 Interview with respondent 29, male, 31 years, Vose, April 2025; Interview with respondent 33, male, 52 years, April 2025; Interview with respondent 60, male, 43 years, Vose, May 2025; interview with respondent 47, male 27 years, Dushanbe, May 2025.

however have close relatives and friends with a farming background, or would have lived in a farming family at some point in their lives. It is therefore remarkable that they did not view climate change as a driver of migration.

This is in part because the link is indirect and in part because there is limited understanding of climate change in Tajikistan, as acknowledged by some respondents. Labour migrants see the number one cause of migration as unemployment and low wages in Tajikistan. 34 of 42 interviewees stated that insufficient income was the main reason for their migration, with six of the remaining ones not answering and two travelling abroad for education.

Even some NGO staff believe the impact of climate change is often exaggerated.<sup>64</sup> A journalist agreed that climate change is not understood by people as a major factor yet, due to lack of information.<sup>65</sup> A senior consultant in an environmental organisation confirmed that "If people are asked about the reasons, then hardly anyone says that it is climate change - they say conflicts, lack of work, natural disasters, etc."<sup>66</sup>

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64 Respondent 11- Independent expert and employee of a local NGO in Khatlon region on labour migration issues, April 2025.

65 Respondent 23- Female Independent investigative journalist, civil activist and media expert, Dushanbe, April 2025.

66 Interview with respondent 20 - male, NGO senior consultant, Location: Dushanbe, April 2025.

### 3. Looking for the Climate Change – Migration - Radicalisation Nexus

This section reviews what was already known about radicalisation in Tajikistan and the evidence concerning the hypotheses presented in the *Introduction*.

#### 3.1 Background on Radicalisation in Tajikistan

Radicalisation is a process through which individuals warm up to and eventually adopt extreme political and social views, relative to the political and social system where they live. Radicalisation in this report is used a value-neutral term and does not imply moral condemnation. Under authoritarian regimes, depending on the context, radicalisation could result into individuals becoming supporters of liberal and democratic groups, as well as of other groups advocating authoritarian or even totalitarian alternative to the regime in place. In the context of Tajikistan, radicalisation appears to largely consist of individuals becoming more and more attracted by various strands of political Islam, even if there are of course also liberal and democratic critics of the government. The main trends of political Islam in Tajikistan, all considered by the Tajik government to be extremists, include:

- The Islamic Renaissance Party: a moderate Islamist group influenced by the Muslim Brotherhood, participated in electoral politics but it is currently banned.
- Quietist Salafi groups: they advocate re-Islamisation from below and focus on preaching. They are mostly not organised in party-like groups, but all Salafist activities are banned in Tajikistan.
- Hizb ut Tahrir (Liberation Party): a non-violent group that advocates the re-establishment of the Caliphate, its ideology is a blend of Salafist and Muslim Brotherhood ideas. It has always been banned in Tajikistan.
- Jamaat Ansarullah: a global jihadist group affiliated with Al Qaida, it is of course banned but it has a presence in neighbouring Afghanistan.
- The Islamic State in Khorasan: needless to say it is banned, but it has emerged over the years as the main global jihadist group among Tajiks. It is present in Afghanistan, where a number of Tajik citizens are known to be in the ranks of militants.
- Other global jihadist groups currently or previously connected to Al-Qaida: there are hundreds of Tajik citizens in Syria, either within the ranks of Hayat Tahrir as Sham, the group currently ruling Syria, but which separated from Al Qaida years ago, or within the ranks of small jihadist groups, which appear to have retained links to Al Qaida.

The literature established quite a clear link between migration and radicalisation. Up to 85% of those Central Asians volunteering for fighting against the Assad regime in Syria were labour migrants in Russia, according to some studies.<sup>67</sup> In reality precise figures do not exist and the actual drivers of recruitment are still a topic of debate. Labour migrants are assumed to be especially vulnerable to financial incentives, because of financial deprivation.<sup>68</sup> However, Islamic State records recovered in the Middle East show that only 20% of Tajik recruits were jobless.<sup>69</sup>

A 2018 study noted that moving to Russia might have given migrant workers “a greater chance to come into contact with more radical versions of Islam”, due to the greater religious freedom there and also to “exposure to violent-extremist content was more prevalent in Russia because of better access to and affordability of smartphones and the internet in Russia”.<sup>70</sup> In any case, even if we assume that financial incentives played an important role in recruitment, they would likely become radicalised once incorporated into a VEO. The Islamic State, for example, is well known for its sophisticated indoctrination techniques.<sup>71</sup>

A recent (2021) study by Internews showed that content aimed at Tajik readers in Tajikistan was more focused on local content than content aimed at Kazakh, Kyrgyz or Uzbek ones.<sup>72</sup> A typical feature in the case of Tajikistan was the jihadist call to protect fellow citizens in other countries (implying by fighting back), which shows how VEOs see migration as one of the key mobilising issues (alongside the Tajik government’s aggressive secularism and attempts to exploit border tensions with Kyrgyzstan). The study also found that in Tajikistan, hostility towards Western culture was stronger than in other Central Asian countries, while young people’s understanding of success appeared more rooted in conservative attitudes.<sup>73</sup>

A recent debate has concerned whether labour migrants are more exposed to radicalisation and VEO recruitment and whether it is migration which is the problem, or instead the illegal status of many emigrants.<sup>74</sup> In a 2020 World Bank study, young people aged 14–26 were highlighted as the social group most at risk, with 110 mentions out of 440, followed by migrants with 66 mentions. Women ranked third with 43 mentions. The youth is seen as vulnerable due to absent fathers, lack of experience and poor education.<sup>75</sup> A World Bank study found evidence that women abandoned

67 Svante Cornell, ‘Central Asia Is Not a Breeding Ground for Radicalization’, *The Diplomat*, 15 November 2017; ‘85 percent of Tajik youth reportedly join extremist groups while traveling to the Russian Federation’, *AsiaPlus*, 3 October 2024.

68 Rustam Azizi, ‘Radicalization of migrants: what is truth and what is fiction’, *AsiaPlus*, December 26, 2018.

69 World Bank Group, ‘Strengthening Youth Resilience to Radicalization’, p.13.

70 Mohammed S Elshimi with Raffaello Pantucci, Sarah Lain and Nadine L Salman, ‘Understanding the Factors Contributing to Radicalisation Among Central Asian Labour Migrants in Russia’, RUSI, April 2018, 64-5.

71 See among others Jacob Olidort, Marcus Sheff, ‘Teaching Terror: The Islamic State’s Textbooks, Guidance Literature, and Indoctrination Methods’, Washington : The Washington Institute, 15 July 2016; Colleen McCue, et al., ‘The Islamic State Long Game: A Tripartite Analysis of Youth Radicalization and Indoctrination’, CTC Sentinel, 10:8 (September 2017).

72 *Radicalism Online: An Analysis of the Meanings, Ideas, and Values of Violent Extremism in Central Asia*, (Bishkek, Kyrgyzstan: Internews, 2021), pp. 9–11, 31–3, 64, 67.

73 Ibid.

74 Rustam Azizi, ‘Радиализация мигрантов: в чем есть правда, а в чем вымысел’ [Radicalization of Migrants: What is Truth and What is Fiction], *AsiaPlus*, 26 December 2018; Edward Lemon, ‘Pathways to Violent Extremism: Evidence From Tajik Recruits to Islamic State’, *The Harriman Magazine*, May 2018.

75 World Bank Group, ‘Strengthening Youth Resilience to Radicalization’, pp. 25-26.

by their husbands with their children were at high risk because they tend to face particularly difficult financial and psychological challenges.<sup>76</sup>

Russian bans on Central Asian labour migrants who break rules might, in fact, favour radicalisation, because in Tajikistan the large majority (294,000) of the 330,000 banned (as of 2016) seemingly stayed illegally in Russia, waiting out the end of the ban.<sup>77</sup> These resulted in a large number of labour migrants finding themselves in even more vulnerable conditions, making them more susceptible to radicalisation.

### 3.2 Existing prevention measures

The Tajik government identifies activities by independent religious groups and clerics as a potential source of radicalisation, due to the strong presence of Salafi and other radical preachers within the ranks of religious activists and preachers in Central Asia. As a result, the Tajik government places strong restriction on religious activities. This has been criticised on human right grounds and also as a policy that risks radicalising existing religious activists and/or driving non-violent extremists towards violence.<sup>78</sup> In any case, this policy does not impact on migrants once they are abroad, who may have easier access to a variety of religious groups.

A JICA study found in 2020 that migrants obtained information on predeparture preparation primarily from friends, relatives, family members, nongovernmental organizations (NGOs), individual brokers, and newspaper advertisements. The Tajik government has also invested limited resources in the pre-migration briefing of labour migrants, with the intent of preparing them to the challenges that they will face in the host country. The Tajik government's predeparture services were however found to offer only limited guidance and knowledge of in-demand skills in foreign labor markets, leaving migrants without proper knowledge of the rules and regulations associated with their stay abroad, as well as their rights and obligations.<sup>79</sup> There has also been door-to-door campaigning to warn citizens of the danger represented by extremist organisations.<sup>80</sup> The assessment of the 2016-2020 National Strategy and Action Plan on Countering Extremism and Terrorism identified a need to intensify closer engagement of civil society organizations in preventive efforts against violent extremism and terrorism.<sup>81</sup>

The 2021-25 National Strategy and Action Plan on Countering Extremism and Terrorism identifies young labour migrants as a high-risk group:

*There are shortcomings in the organization of labor migration, legal protection and shielding migrants from the influence of extremist*

76 World Bank Group, 'Strengthening Youth Resilience to Radicalization', p.26.

77 Dmitry Poletaev, 'Migration Factors of Population Radicalization in Central Asia. Conclusions for Russia', Russian International Affairs Council, 20 March 2017.

78 World Bank Group, 'Strengthening Youth Resilience to Radicalization: Evidence from Tajikistan', April 2020, <<https://documents1.worldbank.org/curated/en/327951586870202514/pdf/Strengthening-Youth-Resilience-to-Radicalization-Evidence-from-Tajikistan.pdf>>; 'Tajikistan's Crackdown on Dissent: Erosion of Rights and Civic Space, CIVICUS, 17 February 2025; Edward Lemon, 'Daesh and Tajikistan', RUSI Commentary, 9 November 2015.

79 Takashi Yamano et al., 'Strengthening Predeparture Services for Labor Migrants in Tajikistan Post-COVID-19', Tokyo : ADB, 2019, 3.

80 Farangis Najibullah, 'Door-To-Door Campaign Targets Rising Radicalization In Tajikistan', RFE/RL, 9 October 2024.

81 <https://www.impactpool.org/jobs/784438>

*groups in host countries and deepening social problems in the families of migrants who remain in their home countries. In particular, we are talking about abandoned families, about difficulties in the support and upbringing of children in incomplete families.<sup>82</sup>*

In practical terms, the concrete proposals of The National Strategy and Action Plan in this regard are limited to:

- a) Improving the quality of pre-migration training;
- b) promoting of better conditions of stay and protection of the migrant workers' rights;
- c) Using social networks, the influence of Tajik diasporas in host countries, remote monitoring by parents (family).<sup>83</sup>

It should also be noted that migrant communities are also active in this field. A 2018 study found that diaspora leaders were credited with a role in preventing radicalisation by 18% of the labour migrant surveyed, while nearly a third "talked about how ordinary members of the community help each other overcome various problems, including radicalisation".<sup>84</sup>

### 3.3 Are Labour Migrants of Rural Background More Vulnerable to Radicalisation?

This section discusses Hypothesis a (see Introduction) in the light of the evidence gathered during the project.

#### 3.3.1 Culture Shock and Social Isolation

There is evidence that migrants of rural origins are more likely to suffer from a stronger culture shock due to migration abroad.<sup>85</sup> According to the Eurasian Development Bank, in 2013, 69% of Tajik migrants in Russia at that time and 82% of those who had returned home lived previously in the countryside, suggesting that migrants of rural origins were less likely to withstand the stress of migration and more likely to return home.<sup>86</sup>

The big city environment, more than specifically Russia, might be the source of the shock: one woman from Bokhtar, who found employment in an agricultural business, thought that culture shock was an overstatement, but noted that the work rhythm and attitude was challenging.<sup>87</sup> Another woman from Bokhtar noted that culture shock and separation from family are more damaging than bad treatment: "It is the inner pain that changes a person deeply and forever."<sup>88</sup> A mullah reported being told by his parishioners who migrated that "life is fast, people are busy, indifferent.

82 'Toolkit on prevention of extremism, rehabilitation and reintegration of returnees from armed conflict zones into the republic of Tajikistan', Dushanbe : UNDP, 2023, 23.

83 'Toolkit on prevention of extremism, rehabilitation and reintegration of returnees from armed conflict zones into the republic of Tajikistan', Dushanbe: UNDP, 2023, 23.

84 Elshimi cit., 59.

85 Interview with respondent 24 - English teacher, blogger, content maker, influencer and civil activist, Location: Kulob, April 2025.

86 Evgeny Vinokurov, Vladimir Pereboyev, 'Labour Migration and Human Capital in Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan: Impact of Accession to the SES', in *EDB Eurasian Integration Yearbook 2013*, Almaty : EDB, 82.

87 Interview with respondent 50, female, 26 years old, from Bokhtar, April 2025.

88 Interview with respondent 38, female, 29 years, Bokhtar, April 2025.

No one helps for free.”<sup>89</sup> The experts consulted identified a number of sources of culture shock for rural Tajik labour migrants:

- **Rural origins:** Living in rural areas often involves a more traditional, quiet and insular lifestyle. Moving to a large city can be shocking due to the sudden change in pace of life, social environment and cultural norms. Migrants accustomed to the traditional rural way of life experience culture shock when confronted with a fast pace of life, cultural diversity and unfamiliar social norms. Two migrant interviewees explicitly use the word “shock” to describe the impact of moving from Khatlon to Russia, not just Moscow and St Petersburg but also mostly Muslim Kazan.<sup>90</sup>
- **Educational level:** Education can have a significant impact on adaptation. People with higher education and specialised skills can find work and integrate into a new society more easily. A low level of education can limit employment opportunities and increase feelings of insecurity. While in Tajikistan urban-rural disparity in education is low up to high school, in rural areas university education is half that of urban areas (21% vs 40% of those aged 25-29).<sup>91</sup>
- **Skill sets:** If migrants do not have skills that match the labour market requirements of the destination country, this can lead to difficulties in their finding a job and adapting. Some labour migrants noted that their degrees and qualifications were of little use in Russia.<sup>92</sup>
- **Language barriers:** Not knowing the language of the destination country is one of the main factors contributing to culture shock. It makes communication difficult, which can increase feelings of isolation and stress. Migrants from rural areas and especially women are much less likely to know Russian to any degree of fluency when they arrive in Russia, a fact that is likely to compound their social isolation and force them to rely exclusively on fellow Tajiks. One of the migrants interviewed wholeheartedly endorsed the importance of the language issue.<sup>93</sup> One expert noted that 50-60% of high school graduates in rural areas do not even speak basic Russian.<sup>94</sup>
- **Social connections:** Separation from family and community can exacerbate adaptation difficulties. In our sample of 42 labour migrants who spent time in Russia, they virtually unanimously reported a high level of social isolation, with little or no social interaction with the Russian population outside

89 Interview with respondent 63, Imam of local mosque, Kulob, May 2025.

90 Interview with respondent 9, Male, 27 years old, Bokhtar, Khatlon region, April 2025; Interview with respondent 10, Female, 35 years old, Kulyab, Kazan, April 2025.

91 [https://www.education-inequalities.org/indicators/comp\\_higher/tajikistan#ageGroups=%5B%22comp\\_higher\\_4yrs\\_2529%22%5D&years=%5B%222017%22%5D](https://www.education-inequalities.org/indicators/comp_higher/tajikistan#ageGroups=%5B%22comp_higher_4yrs_2529%22%5D&years=%5B%222017%22%5D)

92 Interview with respondent 18, female, 31 old, teacher, April 2025; interview with respondent 45, female, Dushanbe, April 2025; Interview with respondent 52, Female, 31 years old, Kulyab, April 2025.

93 Interview with respondent 61, NGO representative, Dushanbe, May 2025.

94 Interview with respondent 11- NGO expert in Khatlon region on labour migration issues, April 2025.

the workplace. Support from family and friends often helps migrants cope with change more easily.

- **Economic conditions:** Moving to a country with higher living standards and prices can cause additional stress. Migrants may face financial difficulties, adding to the culture shock.
- **Psychological aspects:** Individual characteristics such as stress levels, resistance to change and readiness to face new challenges influence how a person perceives cultural differences. Migrants from rural areas are known to be particularly vulnerable to developing mental disorders such as depression and anxiety when moving abroad. The disconnect from their familiar environment, lack of support from family and friends, language barriers and cultural differences can lead to feelings of loneliness, depression and anxiety. Migrants from rural areas are more likely to be subject to stigmatisation and discrimination by the host country's urban population, which worsens their psychological state. Because of ethical constraints, our researchers were asked not to enquire about stress and trauma (which might have awakened ill feelings), but they enquired about anxiety and 11 out of 42 respondents confirmed suffering from anxiety issues.
- **Gendered vulnerabilities:** Women, especially those working in the informal sector, are exposed to additional emotional stress such as exploitation, violence and unstable employment. Lack of social support, homesickness and financial instability also contribute to depression and anxiety, as one migrant agreed.<sup>95</sup>
- **Attachment to traditions and patriarchal norms:** Migrants from rural areas may have difficulty accepting modern norms, especially regarding freedom of behaviour, gender equality and changing roles in society
- **Lack of experience** in communicating with other cultures increases the likelihood of culture shock.
- **Ignorance of local laws** can easily lead to problems with law enforcement, which in turn can be traumatic. Several migrant interviewees endorsed this point.<sup>96</sup>

It may surprise that the experts did not mention living in a non-Muslim country as an issue. This is not because religion does not matter in Tajikistan. The last time religious practice was surveyed in Tajikistan (2012), Pew Research found that 39% of Tajik Muslims (98.7% of the population) prayed five times a day, 15% attended the mosque more than once a week and another 15% weekly, with 54% never attending. This was at that time the highest level of religious practice in Central Asia. Attendance was well below that of Turkey but, importantly, almost all those attending were men (so among Men the percentage was in fact almost double the cited

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<sup>95</sup> Interview with respondent 61, NGO representative, Dushanbe, May 2025.

<sup>96</sup> Interviews with respondents 39, 25, 21; interview with respondent 37, psychologist and expert on domestic violence and gender issues, Bokhtar, April 2025.

percentages).<sup>97</sup> The fact is that, as a 2018 report found, religious Tajiks have greater freedom to practice in Russia, compared to Tajikistan.<sup>98</sup> One respondent explicitly stated that “there is a problem, but the reason has not to do with religion, but with the way we are treated”.<sup>99</sup> Fleeing Tajikistan’s repressive attitude towards religious practice was mentioned by two of the interviewees in Turkey as one of the reasons for moving out of the country and not just to Turkey.<sup>100</sup>

In section 4.1 below, the impact of culture shocks is assessed comparatively in the Russian and Turkish settings.

### 3.3.2 Lower Ability to Earn an Adequate Livelihood

Since migrants of rural origins have on average less education and training, this can limit their opportunities in the labour market and increase the likelihood of them only being able to secure low paid, physically demanding work. This, in turn, increases the stress associated with financial insecurity and exploitation.<sup>101</sup> The plight of migrants of rural background might be getting worse: according to an NGO worker, “[in Khatlon] there is a decrease in the share of migrants with vocational education, while most of them have only general education”.<sup>102</sup> This suggests that poorly educated (mostly rural migrants) from Khatlon region represent a growing share of labour migration, given that as noted in 2.5 above Khatlon accounts for a growing share of outmigration.<sup>103</sup>

### 3.3.3 More Conservative Attitudes

One labour migrant noted that cultural adaptation may be more difficult for people who grew up in more conservative rural communities.<sup>104</sup> That Tajikistan is comparatively more conservative is confirmed by the fact that a study found that hostility towards Western culture was stronger in Tajikistan than in other Central Asian countries, while the youth’s understanding of success appeared more rooted in conservative attitudes.<sup>105</sup> Section 4 below discusses whether this conservatism is relevant in the cases of migration to Russia and Turkey. It is worth noting that among the respondents, there was a belief that families that supported Islamist groups maintained Islamist leanings under the surface after the end of the civil war (1992-1997) and transferred them to their offspring.<sup>106</sup>

Women who spend time working abroad are likely to face greater reintegration challenges than men when they return to Tajikistan, especially if they are of a rural background. This is because they are looked

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97 <https://www.pewresearch.org/religion/2012/08/09/the-worlds-muslims-unity-and-diversity-2-religious-commitment/>

98 Elshimi, cit., 64-5.

99 Respondent 5, male, 35 years, Kulob, April 2025.

100 Interview with MH, Tajik migrant to Turkey, March 2025; Interview with E, Tajik migrant to Turkey, April 2025.

101 Interviews with respondents 25, 39, 37.

102 Interview with respondent 2, head of local NGO, Bokhtar, March 2025.

103 Interview with respondent 39, official at the Committee on Women and Family Affairs, April 2025.

104 Interview with respondent 25 – INGO expert in social work and gender advocacy, Dushanbe, April 2025.

105 *Radicalism Online*, cit., 9-11, 3-3, 64, 67.

106 Interview with HR, Tajik migrant in Turkey, March 2025.

upon with the suspicion that their moral character has eroded, explains a Tajik psychologist.<sup>107</sup> This is supported by a FIDH report.<sup>108</sup> Several of the interviewees point in the same direction. There is considerable social stigma in being a woman who went to work abroad on her own, even more so if the family has not agreed to it.<sup>109</sup> Women are also likely to be scapegoated for the breakdown of family ties and worsening living conditions for children left behind, which occur when they have to migrate.<sup>110</sup> However, even educated women are likely to become frustrated as they are rarely able to find a job suiting their specialisation. The stereotypical view of employers also plays a role – “for them, our women are cooks, nannies, cleaners, etc”.<sup>111</sup>

### 3.4 Is the Gap between Supply and Demand of Migrant Labour from Tajikistan Growing?

This section discusses Hypothesis b (see Introduction), on the basis of the evidence the project was able to gather.

The migrant interviewees agree that the Crocus Hall attack in Moscow in April 2024 was a turning point for Tajik migration flows. In the words of one of them: “After the attack on Crocus city hall in Moscow ..., the life of Tajik citizen migrants in Russia became much worse, every Russian citizen saw us as terrorists ...”.<sup>112</sup>

Anecdotal evidence suggests that many were forced to leave Russia and return to Tajikistan: “the companies were not interested anymore to offer jobs for Tajik citizen ... because of the attack”.<sup>113</sup> The exact numbers of returned migrants are unknown, but according to the Tajik government, from January to June 2024, the flow of labour migrants from Tajikistan to Russia decreased by 15%, amounting to about 387,000 people.<sup>114</sup> Russian figures show 1,030,200 arrivals and 1,006,600 departures in January-August 2024, including however multiple entries and exists. These figures do not account for illegal residents in Russia, which the Russian Institute of Demographic Research estimates at an additional 20%.<sup>115</sup> This fact might explain why, contrary to what labour migrants report, no outflow of Tajik migrants is recorded in official statistics after the April 2024 crackdown on illegal Tajik migration.<sup>116</sup> Due to the new restrictions on families, female migration appears to have been affected even more seriously than male migration: according to data for the first half of 2024, more than 78,700 women left Tajikistan to work abroad, which is 10,700 less than for the

107 Interview with respondent 43, social worker and psychologist, Kulob, April 2025.

108 ‘From Tajikistan to Russia: Vulnerability and abuse of migrant workers and their families’, Paris : International Federation for Human Rights, 2014, 6-7.

109 Interview with respondent 39, official at the Committee on Women and Family Affairs, April 2025.

110 Ibid.

111 interview with respondent 37, psychologist and expert on domestic violence and gender issues, Bokhtar, April 2025; interview with respondent 36, human rights activist, Dushanbe, April 2025.

112 Interview with HR, Tajik migrant in Turkey, April 2025.

113 Ibid.

114 ‘Поток трудовых мигрантов из Таджикистана снизился на 15% в первом полугодии’, [‘Flow of Labor Migrants From Tajikistan Decreased by 15% in the First Half of the Year’], *Vedomosti*, 6 August 2024.

115 Petr Akorov, ‘Россияне все прекрасно понимают насчет мигрантов’ [Russians understand everything perfectly well about migrants], *Regnum*, August 15, 2023

116 ‘Tajikistan migration situation report July-August 2024’, Dushanbe : IOM, 2025.

same period in 2023.<sup>117</sup> Meanwhile, the number of women who returned during this period was 80,500 – 16,500 more than for the first six months of last year.<sup>118</sup>

The Russian authorities created additional difficulties for migrants by announcing bills aimed at restricting areas of employment for migrants, excluding them from medical institutions, taxis, pharmacies, schools and kindergartens, as well abolishing simplified procedures for obtaining a residence permit for families of migrants temporarily working in Russia under a patent.<sup>119</sup>

Demand for Tajik labour therefore likely declined in Russia during 2024, although this drop should not be overstated. Russia remains nonetheless the favourite destination for Tajik labour migrants, also suggesting that they struggle to find alternative destinations. According to the World Bank, more than 80% of labour migrants from Tajikistan still went to Russia in 2024.<sup>120</sup> The decrease in Russia was only in small part offset by higher demand elsewhere. Among labour migrants there is a belief that they might be welcome in the richer parts of Europe:

*I have lots of friends who are living in Germany, they are earning good money in comparing to Tajikistan, Russia and Turkey. According to my information, the government is also supporting the migrants and there are lots of jobs for labour workers.<sup>121</sup>*

*I heard a lot about European countries, I know that European countries give residence easily and which countries give it harder or reject the migrants. I have information that there is good work there and labour workers earning good money there. At least those countries are much better than Turkey and Tajikistan in earning money and when you arrive to Europe you don't have problem of hiding from police or escaping from police.<sup>122</sup>*

An IOM survey found in 2023 that 9% of returned Tajik labour migrants wanted to migrate for work to the UK and 8% to Germany.<sup>123</sup> Available data does not cover illegal migrants, but it does suggest that Tajik migration to Europe was increasing even before Crocus Hall, with 6,000 officially registered in Germany alone as of 2023.<sup>124</sup> In Lithuania, the second most important destination, there were 6,500 officially registered as of mid-2025.<sup>125</sup> The UK is also emerging as a destination, with 1,000 arrivals in 2023, although only for seasonal workers.<sup>126</sup> However, in practice getting

117 Нигина Аслонова, 'Изменения миграционных законов в России снизили выезд женщин из Таджикистана', [Changes in Migration Laws in Russia Have Reduced the Number of Women Leaving Tajikistan], *AsiaPlus*, 5 August 2024; interview with respondent 21 – INGO employee, political scientist, civil activist and independent expert on security, migration and human rights, Dushanbe, April 2025.

118 Ibid.

119 Interview with respondent 24 – English teacher, blogger, content maker, influencer and civil activist, Kulob, April 2025.

120 'World Bank: Tajikistan leads in remittance share of the economy', *AsiaPlus*, 11 March 2025.

121 Interview with ARO, Tajik migrant in Turkey, April 2025.

122 Interview with AA, Tajik migrant in Turkey, March 2025.

123 'MTM Baseline assessment and surveys: returning migrant workers in Tajikistan'. Dushanbe : IOM, February 2023, 8.

124 Nigorai Fazliddin, 'Tajik labour migrants looking for greener pastures', EUCAM Commentary No 50, January 2023.

125 'Why does Lithuania want to close its visa centre in Tajikistan?', LRT.lt, 29 June 2025.

126 'Tajikistan: Migrant laborers seeking alternatives to Russia', Eurasianet, 8 June 2023.

to Europe is very hard and might not be getting easier: Lithuania decided to close its Visa centre in Tajikistan in June 2025.<sup>127</sup> and repeated failures strengthen the sense of rejection and the feeling of not being needed anywhere. Turkey, while a relatively minor target migration country for Tajiks in its own right, is absorbing the bulk of those who get stuck on their way to Europe.<sup>128</sup> Nine out of 10 respondents interviewed in Turkey mentioned that they aimed to reach Europe, but were rejected. Half had moved there from Russia, while the other half followed advice from their social circle to try Western Europe rather than Russia. However, Turkey's government stopped its free visa for Tajik citizens shortly after the Crocus City Hall attack, turning the bulk of them into illegal residents. One interviewee had a particularly gruesome experience:

*During these two years, I have tried more than five times to cross the Balkan borders illegally and enter to European countries but unfortunately, each time, I caught in different Balkan countries by their border policies and deported back to Turkey.<sup>129</sup>*

Despite repeated failures, many keep trying, sometimes adopting a different route:

*It's very hard to cross the borders, I have tried several times but unfortunately, I couldn't make it. In coming summer, I have plan to go to Italy by using the big boats or commercial ships. I said before, I will never return back home in Tajikistan, I will try 100 more times but I will make it to Europe.<sup>130</sup>*

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127 'Why does Lithuania want to close its visa centre in Tajikistan?', LRT.lt, 29 June 2025.

128 Galiya Ibragimova, 'Why Are Central Asian Migrant Workers Spurning Russia?', Carnegie Endowment, 1 August 2024.

129 Interview with MJ, Tajik migrant in Turkey, April 2025.

130 Interview with AA, Tajik migrant in Turkey, March 2025.

## 4. Case Studies Russia and Turkey as Recruitment Grounds for VEOs

Having established what type of (indirect) impact climate change has on radicalisation, this section discusses how the extra supply of migrant labour affects radicalisation in two countries of Tajik immigration, Russia and Turkey. The limitations of this study mean that we cannot isolate the specific impact of an increased supply of labour migrants of rural origins. As noted in 2.5 above, Russia is by far the main destination of Tajik labour migrants and that is why it is included as a case study. Turkey has been chosen because it is the other main host country of illegal Tajik migrants, who are of special interest when studying radicalisation.

### 4.1 Culture Shocks

It should be noted that these two diasporas are organised very differently. The Tajik diaspora in Russia is very dispersed and therefore very disorganised. In Turkey, by contrast, Tajiks tend to cluster into homogeneous communities, occupying entire neighbourhoods in big cities such as Istanbul and Izmir. Still, even in Russia Tajik immigrants have been reporting how diaspora leaders helped resolving problems (see 3.2 above).

Some of the sources of culture shocks for migrants of rural background listed above clearly have a different impact for migrants to Russia than for those to Turkey:

- **Language barrier:** In this regard, Russia presented on average less of an adaptation problem than Turkey, due to the ability of many Tajiks to speak Russian. The importance of knowing at least some of the local language is highlighted by the fact that women from rural areas, despite difficulties, show greater resilience when they receive language training.<sup>131</sup>
- **Attachment to tradition and patriarchal norms:** The culture shock in Russia was definitely strong: ‘especially how women behave, alcohol everywhere, and cold attitudes’.<sup>132</sup> Tajik emigrants to Turkey certainly expected a better welcome there than in Russia, but this was only partly the case. Some were disappointed that they did not receive much Muslim solidarity once they arrived in Turkey.<sup>133</sup>
- **Lack of experience in communicating with other cultures:** The experience of migration in Russia is often traumatic, noted a researcher:

*...rudeness, suspicion, arrogance and humiliation. Bad attitudes apply to both men and women, and can serve as a basis for “cultural” shock.*

<sup>131</sup> Interview with respondent 24 - English teacher, blogger, content maker, influencer and civil activist, Kulob, April 2025.

<sup>132</sup> Interview with respondent 9, male, 27 years, Bokhtar, April 2025; interview with respondent 10, female, 35 years, Kulob, April 2025.

<sup>133</sup> Interview with MJ, Tajik migrant in Turkey (Izmir), April 2025.

*In the Russian Federation there is no such respectful attitude towards elders, towards age, to which residents of Central Asia are accustomed since childhood.*<sup>134</sup>

However, as discussed below in greater detail, Tajik migrants were not particularly welcome in Turkey either, nor did Turkish culture necessarily appear closer:

*I have to say that working or living in Russia is much easier for a Tajik citizen than [sic] working in Turkey because in Russia we share a lot culturally....*<sup>135</sup>

## 4.2 Opportunity to Earn an Adequate Livelihood

Among respondents, the belief that money is a major driver of recruitment into VEOs is widespread.<sup>136</sup> Interviewees narrate tales of fellow migrants being offered considerable financial rewards to work for Islamic State.<sup>137</sup> “Sometimes people are fooled by promises of money and a “better life,” especially those who are lonely or desperate.”<sup>138</sup> It is worth noting that there was consensus among the interviewees in Turkey that salaries and job opportunities were much better in Russia. Only respondents who were themselves radicalised to some extent ruled out money as a driver of recruitment (see 4.4 below for a discussion of these cases).<sup>139</sup> These, and some others, mention instead the repressive attitude of the Tajik government as a driver.

## 4.3 Hostility Towards Migrants

The experience of living in Russia was at best a mixed one for Tajik labour migrants, even before the Crocus Hall attack. The table below, drawn from an IOM survey, shows how after the Crocus Hall attack the crackdown on migrants emerged as the most important reason for returning to Tajikistan (August 2024 column), alongside family pressure. Documents issues also emerged as another important reason for returning at it is likely linked to the crackdown in Russia as well.<sup>140</sup>

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134 Interview with respondent 22, researcher of gender issues, Dushanbe, April 2025.

135 Interview with TT, Tajik migrant in Turkey, April 2025.

136 Interview with AR, Tajik migrant in Turkey, March 2025; Interviews with HR, Tajik migrant in Turkey, April 2025; interview with I, 33 years, Istanbul, April 2025.

137 Interview with respondent 29, male, 31 years, Vose, April 2025.

138 Interview with respondent 9, Male, 27 years old, Bokhtar, Khatlon region, April 2025.

139 Interview with TT and AR, Tajik migrants in Turkey, April 2025.

140 ‘Tajikistan: return migrant survey’, rounds 2-3-4, February 2023-December 2024, IOM.

**Table 2: Reasons for return to Tajikistan**

Reasons for return to Tajikistan (excl. short term visits)	Nov-23	Aug-24	Dec-24
	Family pressure	27%	22%
Documents issues			10%
Deportation	8%	13%	9%
Completion of work			8%
Health reasons	14%	9%	7%
Violation of migrant rights		9%	6%
Post Crocus Hall crackdown, violation of migrant rights		22%	10%
Economic downturn/loss of job	18%	16%	4%
Personal safety	6%	7%	2%
Conflict and security situation, Russian mobilisation		4%	3%
Other	27%	7%	18%
Total	100%	100%	100%

The least hostile environment that Tajik migrants experienced abroad appears to have been the workplace, with seven reporting it as mixed (sometimes good, sometimes bad), six as negative, and three as positive. Some note that Russian employers were relatively fair until the Crocus City Hall attack.<sup>141</sup> Within this small sample, feelings varied about Turkish employers too, with 60% of respondents describing their experience as mixed (sometimes good, sometimes bad). Overall, working in Russia appears not to have been a significantly worse experience, and some Tajik migrants to Russia were quite satisfied, not least due to high salaries, even compared to Turkey, where their conditions remained quite precarious.

Turkey should perhaps be expected to beat Russia in terms of the perception of the attitudes of the general population, given that it is a Muslim country and that there was no Crocus Hall incident to cause a massive backlash. Indeed, in the early days of Tajik migration to Turkey, when numbers were low and the Turkish economy buoyant, that seemed to have been the case.<sup>142</sup> In 2016-19, 6,500 Tajiks entered Turkey legally and got relatively stable and well-aid jobs in the service sector.<sup>143</sup>

In Russia, outright hostility is definitely reported, although mostly as attempts to exploit the plight of illegal residents, who are not in a position to approach the police when salaries are not paid or other abuses are committed.<sup>144</sup> Out of 42 respondents who had experience of living in Russia, 18 stated that their experience was mixed, with some Russians being friendly and others being hostile. Only one stated having had a thoroughly positive experience, while seven had a thoroughly negative one. 14 did not answer. This is an example of a typical “mixed” view:

<sup>141</sup> Interview with ARO, Tajik migrant in Turkey, April 2025.

<sup>142</sup> ‘As Russia loses its luster, Tajik laborers head to Turkey’, Eurasianet, 5 March 2019.

<sup>143</sup> Abubakr Rakhmonov, ‘Turkey as a new direction of labor migration from Tajikistan in the context of the economic crisis in Russia’, paper presented at the ‘Consolidation of Russian society in new geopolitical realities: materials of the All-Russian Scientific and Practical Conference’, Moscow, 2023.

<sup>144</sup> Interview with AA, HR, AR, MJ, I, Tajik migrants in Turkey, April 2025.

*Not all the Russian people but the majority of the Russian people don't like to connect a Tajik citizen in their society that's why connecting socially in Russia for a Tajik family or Tajik citizen is very hard. ... But there are good families in Russian society that don't have any problem with Tajik citizen....*<sup>145</sup>

When asked about their experience in Turkey, many respondents did not comment on the attitude of the Turkish population, but three commented negatively and two positively. Of the remaining five, one was new to Turkey and four focused their comments on employers and police. Overall, it is not clear that Tajik migrants see the Turkish population as friendlier, contrary to expectations. One respondent who spent time in Belarus noted how people and government were friendlier there than in either Russian or Turkey.<sup>146</sup>

Russian police were unsurprisingly viewed negatively by Tajik migrants, with 15 expressing negative views about its behaviour and just three having a mixed assessment, and one individual being positive. Faced with the stress of migration, some labour migrants began to drink, many kept going dreaming of going back home one day, others became more religious, and others still became embittered (“they said that the Russians do not respect them, that everyone here is against us”).<sup>147</sup>

In Turkey, migrants often see the police as bad as Russia's and as putting them under constant pressure.<sup>148</sup> Although our sample is admittedly small (10 interviewees), it does show that in the perception of the interviewees, Turkish police and authorities were not friendlier than Russia's: 100% confirmed having been mistreated by Turkish police, or knowing other Tajik migrants who were mistreated while 40% said the same about Russia. It should be noted that 50% of those interviewed had not been to Russia, although almost all had relatives or friends who were there. The Turkish refugee camps are seen as the locus of most abuses, with detainees being abused and their belongings stolen.<sup>149</sup> A rare dissonant voice commented that, “in Turkey, at least Tajik are not being accused of being terrorists all the time”.<sup>150</sup> Treating migrants harshly is of course not a prerogative of Russia or Turkey. Several respondents had experiences of arriving in Greece, Serbia, Bosnia or Bulgaria, and of being treated even worse by the police there, before being forced back to Turkey.<sup>151</sup> Three of them reported serious abuse by European police, especially Greek and Bulgarian, including beatings, seizure of personal belongings and humiliation.<sup>152</sup>

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<sup>145</sup> Interview with TT, Tajik migrant in Turkey, April 2025.

<sup>146</sup> Interview with ARO, migrant in Turkey, March 2025.

<sup>147</sup> Interviews with respondent 9, Male, 27 years old, Bokhtar, Khatlon region, April 2025; Interviews with respondent 10, Female, 35 years old, Kulyab, April 2025; Interview with respondent 4, male, 29 years, Bokhtar, March 2025; interview with respondent 63, Imam of local mosque, Kulob, May 2025.

<sup>148</sup> Interviews with ARO, AA, Tajik migrants in Turkey, April 2025.

<sup>149</sup> Interview with AA, Tajik migrant in Turkey, April 2025.

<sup>150</sup> Interview with TT, Tajik migrant in Turkey, April 2025.

<sup>151</sup> Interviews with AR, MJ, AA, E, Tajik migrants in Turkey, April 2025.

<sup>152</sup> Interview with E, Tajik migrant in Turkey, April 2025; Interview with MJ, Tajik migrant in Turkey, April 2025; Interview with AA, Tajik migrant in Turkey, April 2025; Interview with AA, Tajik migrant in Turkey, April 2025; Interview with E, Tajik migrant in Turkey, April 2025.

The abuse perpetrated on migrants, ranging from police harassment to the difficult living conditions and the exploitation by ruthless employers, is recognised by several respondents as causing anger among Tajiks abroad. The psychological pressure drove even Tajiks with legal immigration status towards returning to Tajikistan.<sup>153</sup> Although millions of Tajiks remain in Russia, they are under very tight restrictions from society, local police and public services like healthcare and transport.<sup>154</sup> Tajik migrants often go out as little as possible, trying to keep a low profile and talk as little as possible even to each other.<sup>155</sup> This often leads to deteriorating health.<sup>156</sup> For parents and women especially, being separated from children was a great source of stress.<sup>157</sup> Abuses suffered by migrants are recognised by several respondents as causing anger among Tajiks abroad. The wave of harassment that followed the Crocus Hall attack in Moscow was the high tide of this.<sup>158</sup> One of the interviewees commented:

*If you speak with illegal migrants who spent years in Turkey and couldn't manage to cross the borders, they are mostly mental and lost their mind. They are very angry and anything could happen with them. You imagine, a person who have been beaten up many times by the border polices, forced to get naked and deported to , where he gets beaten up by Turkish police, what will you expect from that migrant?<sup>159</sup>*

*When I was called terrorist and citizen of an extremist country, I lost my mind, I was planning to kill my Russian boss and many more Russian citizen in the company where I was working but I thought of my family members and I was stopped by other Tajik citizen who were working there.<sup>160</sup>*

It should be noted that the handling of migratory flows at the borders of the EU also has an impact: “One day, if I have the power, I will take my revenge from these unhuman border police and the government of Greece police because they are really inhuman people.”<sup>161</sup>

The wave of harassment that followed the Crocus Hall attack in Moscow represented the high tide of the mistreatment of Tajik migrants.<sup>162</sup> Immigration rules were tightened and enforcement became stricter. Even those who were in a regular position felt intimidated. Even vigilante attacks were reported.<sup>163</sup> The Russian authorities contributed to the wave of anti-Tajik resentment by using language which implied mass support for radical

153 Interview with respondent 18, female, 31 old, teacher, April 2025.

154 Interview with MH, Tajik migrant in Turkey, March 2025; interview with ARO, Tajik migrant in Turkey.

155 Interview with respondent 5, male, 35 years, Kulob, April 2025.

156 Interview with Respondent 10, Female, 35 years old, Kulyab, April 2025.

157 Interviews with respondent 10, Female, 35 years old, Kulyab, April 2025, and interview with respondent 9, Male, 27 years old, Bokhtar, Khatlon region, April 2025.

158 Interviews with AA, AR, TT, MJ, Tajik migrant in Turkey, April 2025; interviews with respondents 5, 7, 9, 53, 10.

159 Interview with AA, Tajik migrant in Turkey, April 2025.

160 Interview with TT, Tajik migrant in Turkey, April 2025.

161 Interview with MJ, Tajik migrant in Turkey, April 2025.

162 Interviews with AA, AR, TT, ARO, MH, Tajik migrants in Turkey, April 2025; interviews with respondents 5, 7, 9, 10.

163 Interview with AR, Tajik migrant in Turkey, April 2025; interview with respondent 5, male, 35 years, Kulob, April 2025.

groups within their ranks.<sup>164</sup> Employers became hostile, labelling Tajiks as “terrorists” and sacking them or refusing to hire them, and landlords started kicking Tajik tenants out.<sup>165</sup> Even previously indifferent or neutral Russians changed their attitude for the worse.<sup>166</sup>

According to one of the respondents, who was only back in Tajikistan for a visit, Russian attitudes towards Tajiks were easing one year after the Crocus City Hall attack.<sup>167</sup> Table 2 above shows some indication that pressure started easing in the second half of 2024 already, with a two percentage points fall in those reporting harassment or pressure from the authorities.

Although Turkey did not have its own Crocus City Hall attack, the repercussion of the Russian attack were felt there, too. The situation was further compounded by the fact that under Russian pressure, even the Turkish authorities stopped issuing free visas to Tajik citizens.<sup>168</sup> Recently, the attitude of the Turkish authorities has also hardened towards migrant families who have legal documents and have houses in Turkey.<sup>169</sup> By 2024–5 it was even becoming harder for Tajik illegal residents to find accommodation.<sup>170</sup>

#### 4.4 How VEOs Exploit the Plight of Labour Migrants

Although the research was not geared towards gathering fresh evidence of VEO recruitment among migrants in Russia, it emerged clearly that the Russian recruitment ground remains fertile today. The level of risk is high in Turkey, too. Aside from the reports of migrants joining Islamic State for financial rewards, as mentioned above, one interviewee reported hearing about the distribution of leaflets at the bazaar, verbal invitations to live differently, and speeches made at mosques.<sup>171</sup>

Others mentioned fight clubs as venues targeted by recruiters.<sup>172</sup> One of the interviewees had heard of Tajik citizens being recruited inside Turkey, typically through social media. This interviewee felt that this type of social media approach was common and quite successful. The social media recruitment efforts are run in the Tajik language and are carried out by Tajik recruiters.<sup>173</sup> Another interviewee who was aware of Islamic State recruitment efforts in Turkey had heard stories of deployments to Afghanistan, Iran, Iraq and Russia, as well as of an underground Islamic State structure in Turkey.<sup>174</sup> He witnessed one case of recruitment personally.<sup>175</sup> One interviewee was aware of three fellow Tajiks being approached by

164 Interview with respondent 53, male, 25 years, Dushanbe, April 2025.

165 Interview with MH, HR, Tajik migrants in Turkey, April 2025.; interview with respondent 16, female, 33 years, Dushanbe, April 2025.

166 Interview with respondent 17, male, 38 years, Kulob, April 2025.

167 Interview with respondent 57, male, 56 years, Vose, May 2025.

168 Interview with HR, Tajik migrant in Turkey, April 2025; interview with respondent 39, official at the Committee on Women and Family Affairs, April 2025.

169 Interview with HR, Tajik migrant in Turkey, April 2025.

170 Ibid.

171 Interview with respondent 10, Female, 35 years old, Kulyab, Kazan, April 2025.

172 Interview with respondent 27, male, 46 years, Dushanbe, April 2025; interview with respondent 28, female, Kulob, 56 years, April 2025

173 Interview with HR, Tajik migrant in Turkey, April 2025.

174 Interview with AR, Tajik migrant in Turkey, April 2025.

175 Ibid.

Islamic State recruiters via social media or telephones, even if he was not sure what their eventual fate was.<sup>176</sup> Others had just heard stories from fellow emigrants.<sup>177</sup> There were also reports of sympathisers of VEOs travelling to Turkey in order to meet their recruiters more easily.<sup>178</sup> Only one of the interviewees was specific about recruitment inside Tajikistan, mentioning that his home district, Varzob near Dushanbe, where senior Islamic State figure Gulmorad Halimov hailed from, was still a hotbed of Islamic State recruitment as some of Gulmorad's loyalists are still active there.<sup>179</sup>

There is definitely anger among the emigrants:

*We are angry on our own government because the reason of becoming refugee and migrants is these corrupt governments and they are the reason that we are insulting and humiliating in foreign countries. [...] The reason that they are committing crime is because they lost their family, lost their country and friends and lost their minds and when they migrating to a foreign country...<sup>180</sup>*

It is not uncommon to hear accusations that

*Tajikistan government is an anti-Islam regime and taking action against the Muslim Tajik brother who are observing the Muslim law and Hijab. Not only in Tajikistan, Uzbekistan and other central Asian countries are against the Islam while most of their population are Muslim brothers.<sup>181</sup>*

More importantly, two of the interviewees in Turkey showed clear signs of radicalisation themselves, both expressing sympathies for Islamist opposition groups. One showed support for Salafi views:

*In Islam we have lots of rules which should follow and one of those rules is Hijab, but recently Iman Ali Rahman ordered that women shouldn't wear full Hijab in the school, government departments and even in the city, which really made Muslim people very angry and that caused that lots of people join to these radical groups in order to take revenge from Imam Ali Rahman.<sup>182</sup>*

The other one even said that he would have joined them if it was not for his parental responsibilities.<sup>183</sup>

*When I was called terrorist and citizen of an extremist country, I lost my mind, I was planning to kill my Russian boss and many more Russian citizen in the company where I was working but I thought of*

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176 Interview with MJ, Tajik migrant in Turkey, April 2025.

177 Interview with I, Tajik migrant in Turkey, April 2025.

178 Interview with MJ, Tajik migrant in Turkey, April 2025.

179 Interviews with E, Tajik migrant in Turkey, April 2025.

180 Interview with MH, Tajik migrant in Turkey, April 2025.

181 Interviews with E, Tajik migrant in Turkey, April 2025.

182 Interviews with MH, Tajik migrants in Turkey, April 2025.

183 Interviews with E, MH, Tajik migrants in Turkey, April 2025.

*my family members and I was stopped by other Tajik citizen who were working there.*<sup>184</sup>

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184 Interview with TT, Tajik migrant in Turkey, April 2025.

## Conclusion

The evidence gathered in this report indicates that climate change in Tajikistan likely has an indirect impact on radicalisation by driving more Tajiks of rural background to migrate abroad. It can be argued that they are less prepared for the challenges ahead and more vulnerable than their fellow urban migrants, even if precise evidence is hard to gather in the absence of in-depth surveys. While climate change does increase the number of Tajik emigrants, a major hurdle in confronting the issue is the lack of understanding among both the population and the government of Tajikistan regarding the impact of climate change on migration. The more unmanageable migration flows become because of excessive number and of the limited skills of those migrating abroad, the greater the chances of radicalisation spreading. Culture shock, mental health issues and financial problems are all prime suspects of being drivers of radicalisation or VEO recruitment risk factors. More migrants of rural background might therefore translate into more migrants getting radicalised, all other factors remaining equal. Higher migration flows exacerbate the reaction of host country authorities that seek to keep migrants out, especially if demand for migrant labour is decreasing, as in Russia and Turkey from 2024. Interventions are conceivable at various stages of the process, but in the meantime, desperate Tajiks increasingly see Europe as their only hope, even if some have already experienced rejection at the Greek border.

At present, the bulk of illegal migrants are males. Their difficult plight often results in families breaking up, therefore affecting women back in Tajikistan. However, even Tajik women abroad, while mostly enjoying at least a legal status, are especially frustrated by being overqualified for the jobs they are able to get. The impact on children of all this is clearly negative.

The recent diversification of the Tajik migrants' target labour markets both adds a new layer of analytical complexity and offers opportunities for comparison. This study looked at Turkey as a new avenue for Tajik emigration and attempted a comparison with Russia. The findings clearly suggest that the radicalising impact of the conditions of migration in Russia can be easily replicated in the new host countries, even in the absence of a local replica of the Crocus Hall attack in Moscow. There are major adaptation issues among Tajik migrants, especially those of rural background, and a lack of support facilities wherever they land. The migration regimes (making legal migration hard to achieve) are however the prime culprits, the more so as coercive efforts to keep labour migrants away are not even effective. If the intent of abusing and humiliating labour migrants is to discourage them, the effectiveness of this approach is doubtful and the side effects are clear: VEOs clearly see opportunities for recruitment in this environment.

Tajik migration policies have made some progress on pre-departure training, the Tajik state lacks resources for adequately supporting Tajik migrants abroad.

## Recommendations

A big policy question is whether out-migration should be contained or not, given also the role of remittances in sustaining the Tajik economy. At present, given insufficient demand for Tajik labour and the worsening condition of many Tajik labour migrants abroad, the need to slow migration flows by supporting farmers and rural households with improved access to basic services such as water, sanitation and health care seems evident. Strengthening social cohesion and conflict resolution mechanisms within communities could also help reduce the migration outflow by reducing conflicts over resources, even if current practices and their potential are not well known and additional research would be useful.<sup>185</sup> Another way to reduce the migration outflow from rural areas could be the development of alternative sources of income (small businesses, cooperatives). One example is the development of organic production cooperatives in Soghd. Improving infrastructure in rural areas would not only make small businesses more viable, but also create local jobs.<sup>186</sup>

The aid community is already investing in climate-resilient agriculture, including drought-resistant crops, crop rotation, improved irrigation, creation of water reservoirs, sustainable farming practices and support for small farming businesses, but much remains to be done. There is also on-going investment on early warning and disaster preparedness systems. There are advocates of the need to provide women with access to microcredit, training and land resources to increase their economic independence and resilience to climate shocks.<sup>187</sup> The STREAM program, implemented in areas like the Khojibakirgan watershed, reportedly shows promise in building such capacity at the local level.<sup>188</sup> STREAM has the added benefit of engaging women in identifying water management gaps and developing adaptation responses, thereby improving their technical capacity and voice in decision-making.<sup>189</sup>

Although there are already some environmental organizations engaged in environmental education, in Tajikistan, the environmental movement remains very weakly developed.<sup>190</sup> The research highlighted the low awareness of climate change impact among interviewees. This is clearly going to be a major impediment in implementing climate adaptation measures and more extensive educational campaigns should be considered. There is scope for external lobbying of the Tajik government, to increase their awareness of the impact of climate change on migration. This could stimulate Dushanbe to become more proactive in this regard.

185 Interview with respondent 25 – INGO expert in social work and gender advocacy, Dushanbe, April 2025.

186 Respondent 24 - English teacher, blogger, content maker, influencer and civil activist, Location: Kulob, April 2025.

187 Interview with respondent 25 – INGO expert in social work and gender advocacy, Dushanbe, April 2025; Interview with respondent 24 - female - English teacher, blogger, content maker, influencer and civil activist, Kulob, Age: 24, April 2025; Interview with respondent 51 - Male, INGO employee, civil and environmental activist and independent human rights expert, Location: Dushanbe, April 2025; Interview with respondent 21 – INGO employee, political scientist, civil activist and independent expert on security, migration and human rights, Dushanbe, April 2025.

188 Interview with respondent 51 - Male, INGO employee, civil and environmental activist and independent human rights expert, Location: Dushanbe, April 2025.

189 Ibid.

190 Interview with respondent 20 – male, NGO senior consultant, Location: Dushanbe, April 2025.

The number of Tajik labour migrants is going to remain very large for the foreseeable future, regardless of the measures adopted. There is therefore a need to better manage the large Tajik diaspora communities. At present the Tajik state lacks the resources to provide more than basic support and even with some donor funding the task would remain a huge one. The most cost-efficient way of improving the management of diaspora communities is to rely on their self-governance. The migrants already seek to organise in communities and support each other, currently with no external support. Arguably, therefore, the most effective prevention, at present, is done by the migrants themselves. Migrant community leaders are fully aware that any flirting with extremism by individuals damages the community as a whole. There might be ways to encourage and support self-management of migrant communities, but policy makers should be aware that intervening in the process would however be as likely to spoil it as to improve it. Caution is advised. This is an area where additional research would certainly be helpful. It is also worth considering supporting Tajik mullahs for work among Tajik emigrants, although the feasibility of this should be assessed carefully. The Uzbek government already deploys schemes involving mullahs visiting diaspora communities abroad.

Working with local communities would also help improving disaster management at moderate cost. Inside Tajikistan, there are examples of volunteer squads of 15-20 people that were created in the jamoats of the Vose district and the city of Kulyab with the support of local authorities, with the task of being on duty along the Yakhsu, Surkhob (Kyzylsu), Kulyabdaryo and Tobaloy rivers during heavy rains, in order to promptly respond to the threat of mudflows and landslides. In case of danger, the volunteers warn local residents, help with evacuation and conduct a primary assessment of the damage. This system has reportedly proven itself especially effective in remote villages, where the prompt response of rescue services is difficult.<sup>191</sup> The potential of these volunteer efforts would be worth exploring further.

Given the impact of poorly managed migration on families and children, which is likely to have long-term consequences, it is worth considering initiatives to support Tajik women left behind to deal with families and often unsteady remittances from husbands working abroad. Women are looking for local opportunities to supplement the family income, but these are in short supply. Those women who have been abandoned by their husbands are of course in even greater need of some opportunity to earn money locally. While there is little evidence of Tajik women being affected by radicalisation on a large scale, neglected children could be very vulnerable.

Since it is largely not migration per se that drives radicalisation, but the way migrants are treated once along the route or once they are in the host country, migration management should be a top priority. Violent repression and systematic abuse are the key drivers of radicalisation and

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<sup>191</sup> Respondent 12 - Representative of the Committee for Emergency Situations of the Republic of Tajikistan, April 2025.

are also not very effective in discouraging labour migrants, as the project's interviewees in Turkey, who keep trying to cross into Europe, should attest. Containing the migration flows will ease pressure somewhat, but the impact will be hardly noticeable if labour migrants are not dealt with more effectively. Seasonal migration, recently trialled with Central Asians in the UK, is an example of a potentially better approach. A key problem is the perhaps 300,000 low skills Tajik migrants, with a track record of illegal migration, who are desperate, are the hardest to manage and the most at risk of radicalisation.

As far as European government and EU institutions are concerned, the priorities could be:

- In the short term, figure a more humane and more efficient way of stopping illegal migration at the border with Turkey.
- Consider re-qualification schemes for the mass of illegal migrants pressing to enter the EU. This would allow tailoring training to labour demand and at the same time contribute towards the objective above.
- Consider support for diaspora communities (for example, in Turkey) in a prevention and de-radicalisation role.
- Develop on-going efforts to support agriculture and adaptation to climate change in Tajikistan.
- Consider options for encouraging and supporting volunteers groups in disaster relief and beyond.

# Impress

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