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Migration from Central Asia to the Russian Federation: The Educational Aspect

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Abstract. The paper analyzes the role of education in shaping the trajectories of migrants from the former Soviet republics of Central Asia (Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, Turkmenistan and Uzbekistan), who came to Russia for the purposes of study or employment, i.e. for labour migration or educational migration. The authors present the results of their research, conducted in 2020–2022, which applied sociological methods and involved further analysis of the data in the context of Russia's interaction with Central Asian states. The paper consequently considers the social characteristics of the studied group, the migrants' level of education, the role of education in motivating them to move to Russia, and the motivation of students to enroll in Russian universities. The study also considers the migrants' knowledge of Russian language, as well as the continuation of their language learning while already residing in Russia. Finally, the study explores the migrants' plans regarding their further education or employment in Russia, or their native countries, or elsewhere abroad. The results of the research suggest that, while a proportion of the youth from Central Asia are somewhat committed to pursuing education in Russia, the majority of labour migrants are not interested in improving their educational level. This is despite the fact that the absence of essential knowledge invariably exerts a negative influence on their professional skills, employment prospects, and language proficiency, as well as on their understanding of the receiving state's culture, legal system and traditions. The authors posit the necessity of the cultural adaptation for migrants and the need for employers to make compulsory efforts to raise their educational level, which should be organized and controlled by state authorities. The research highlights gaps that need to be filled to promote interethnic harmony and mutual understanding in the society.

Key words: Russia, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, Uzbekistan, Turkmenistan, migration, youth, education

Conflicts of interest. The authors declared no conflicts of interest.

Authors' contributions. K.G. Muratshina: research conceptualisation & management, academic literature studies, manuscript writing, manuscript editing. M.V. Valeeva: software management, questionnaire distribution, questionnaire processing, manuscript writing. Both authors have read the final edition of the text and approved it.

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Влияние образовательного фактора на миграционные потоки из Центральной Азии в Российскую Федерацию

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Аннотация. Проанализировано влияние образовательного фактора на миграционные траектории граждан бывших советских республик Центральной Азии (Казахстана, Киргизии, Таджикистана, Туркменистана и Узбекистана), прибывших в Россию с целью получения высшего образования либо устройства на работу, то есть образовательной либо трудовой миграции. Авторы представляют результаты своего исследования, проведенного в 2020–2022 гг. с использованием социологического инструментария и последующего анализа полученных данных в контексте изучения взаимодействия России с центральноазиатскими государствами. Последовательно рассмотрены социальные характеристики изучаемой группы, уровень образования мигрантов, роль образовательной составляющей в их мотивации к переезду в Россию и применительно к студентам — мотивации к поступлению в российские вузы, вопросы владения трудовыми мигрантами и студентами русским языком и его дальнейшего изучения после переезда в РФ и, наконец, планы дальнейшего получения образования либо трудоустройства в России, в своей родной стране или в другом государстве. Результаты исследования показывают, что, хотя часть молодежи из центральноазиатских республик в той или иной степени нацелена на получение образования в России, трудовые мигранты в большинстве своем не заинтересованы в повышении собственного образовательного уровня, несмотря на то, что отсутствие необходимых компетенций не может не оказывать отрицательного влияния на выполнение ими профессиональных обязанностей, возможность коммуникации на русском языке, познания культуры России как принимающей страны и понимания правового устройства и традиций общества, в которое они попали. Подчеркнута необходимость проведения не только культурной адаптации мигрантов, но и принятия нанимающими их работодателями обязательств по повышению образовательного уровня сотрудников своих предприятий. Исследование позволяет выявить лакуны, которые необходимо заполнять в рамках реализации перспективной задачи по сохранению межэтнического согласия и поддержанию взаимопонимания в обществе.

Ключевые слова: Россия, Казахстан, Киргизия, Таджикистан, Узбекистан, Туркменистан, миграция, молодежь, образование

Заявление о конфликте интересов. Авторы заявляют об отсутствии конфликта интересов.

Вклад авторов. Муратшина К.Г.: концептуализация и научное руководство исследованием, работа с научной литературой, написание текста, редактирование текста. Валеева М.В.: работа с программным обеспечением, анкетирование, обработка анкет, написание текста. Оба автора ознакомлены с окончательной версией статьи и одобрили ее.

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Introduction

At present, many Russian cities are characterized by an influx of foreign labour and other migrants from abroad. Consequently, this ongoing influx has resulted in migrants

becoming one of social groups which makes up Russia's population. The social sciences must therefore examine the characteristics of this group. Traditionally, the largest migration flows to the Russian Federation have come from the former

Soviet republics of Central Asia. Significant issues affecting their present situation and prospects for future development include the educational level of migrants and their attainment of higher and/or additional qualifications. This is essential for the cultural integration of migrants, fostering interethnic understanding in society and enabling foreign workers to fulfil their professional duties and comply with regulations and safety precautions.

In academic circles, this topic has been predominantly explored from the perspectives of history and pedagogy (see, e.g.: (Krapivnik, 2015; Kosheleva, 2019; Sharafutdinova, Doronina & Kazakova, 2022)). However, there is a lack of research specifically focused on Central Asian migrants. Moreover, despite the obvious interest in comparing the indicators, the categories of labour and educational migrants are generally considered separately.

This article presents the results of field studies conducted by the authors in 2020–2022 in order to identify the current educational characteristics of the migration flows from Central Asia to Russia. The study of this issue can highlight future steps for relevant organisations in Russia — state authorities, educational organisations, employers — to ensure a higher educational level of the foreign workforce that will be corresponding to the requirements of the host country.

Materials and Methods

The object of the study included the citizens of the Republic of Kazakhstan, the Kyrgyz Republic, the Republic of Tajikistan, Turkmenistan, and the Republic of Uzbekistan, who had come to Russia for work or study. The research was carried out using a survey method (handout questionnaire and online survey). Interviews were carried out with 280 labour migrants living and working in 20 Russian cities at the time of the survey (Aramil, Astrakhan, Verkhnyaya Pyshma, Dolgoprudny, Yekaterinburg, Kazan, Moscow, Nizhny Novgorod, Novosibirsk, Novouralsk, Nyagan, Perm, Rostov-on-Don, St. Petersburg, Sredneuralsk, Tomsk, Tula, Tyumen, Cheboksary, Chelyabinsk), as well as 300 full-time university students studying in 14 Russian cities at the time of the survey (Astrakhan, Volgograd, Yekaterinburg, Kazan, Krasnoyarsk, Moscow, Novosibirsk, Perm, Rostov-on-Don, St. Petersburg, Stavropol, Tomsk, Tula, Cheboksary).

Due to the conditions of the COVID-19 pandemic, a spontaneous sample type approach, based on the availability of the object, was used, involving labour migrants and students from all five Central Asian states. The age composition of the sample is shown in Figures 1 and 2.

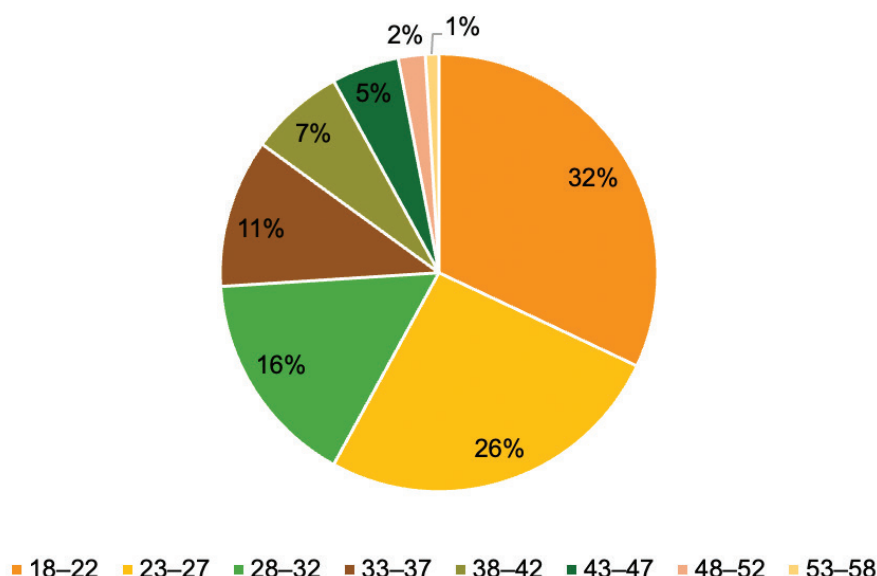


Figure 1. Age Allocation among Labour Migrants

Source: compiled by K. G. Muratshina and M. V. Valeeva.

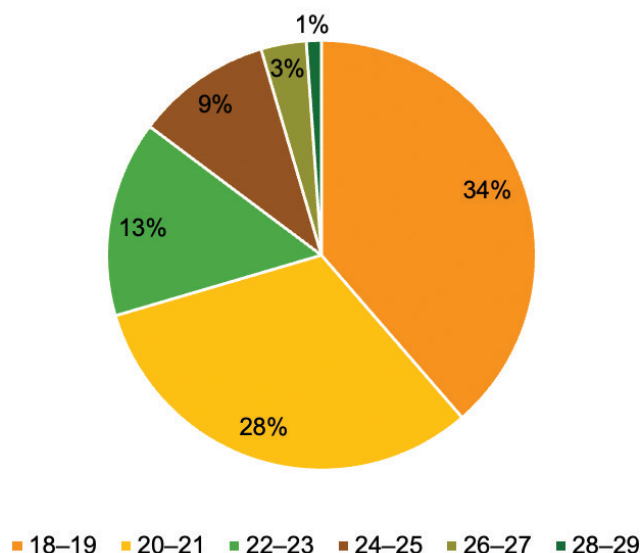


Figure 2. Age Allocation among Students

Source: compiled by K.G. Muratshina and M. V. Valeeva.

As it can be seen, migrant workers coming to Russia are mainly young people. The age distribution of students correlates with the curricula. According to the survey results, 83 % of students were enrolled in Bachelor's degree programmes, 9 % in specialist diplomas, 6 % in Master's programmes, and 2 % in postgraduate courses. Bachelor's degree programmes at universities typically attract the widest range of applicants, while the number

of areas that still require a specialist diploma is not very extensive. In terms of master's level, the recruitment and quotas for foreign applicants are smaller. Finally, a minimal proportion of graduates traditionally enrol in graduate school.

In terms of demographic characteristics, the number of young men among the respondents was about 1.7 times higher than the number of young women (Figures 3 and 4).

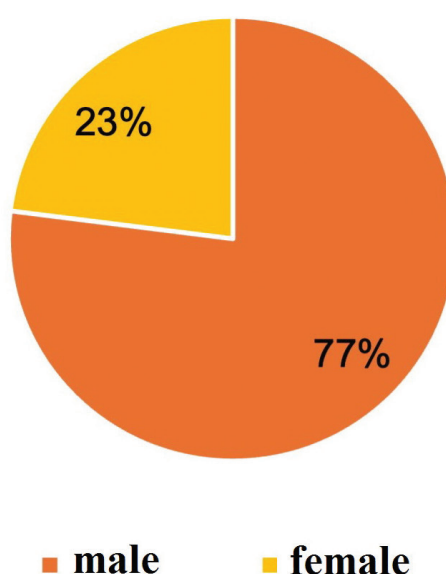


Figure 3. Gender Allocation among Labour Migrants

Source: compiled by K.G. Muratshina and M. V. Valeeva.

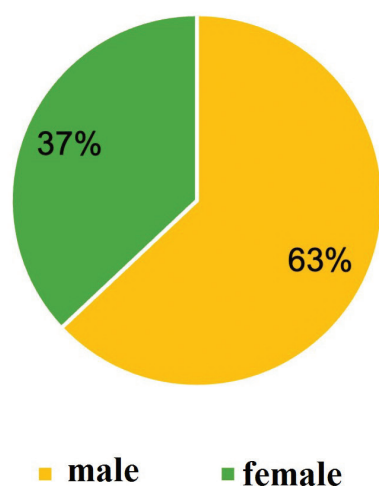


Figure 4. Gender Allocation among Students

Source: compiled by K. G. Muratshina and M. V. Valeeva.

This asymmetry can be explained by the persistent gender inequality in Central Asian societies (see, e.g.: (Igarashi & Kumo, 2016; Kamp, 2016; Laruelle, 2017; Omaleki & Reed, 2019; Najjar, Devkota & Feldman, 2022)), which also affects the education. Higher education, especially abroad, remains more accessible to men.

Of the surveyed labour migrants, 46 % have Uzbek citizenship, 23 % are from Tajikistan, 16 % are from Kyrgyzstan and 6 % are from Turkmenistan. Meanwhile, 4 % have Kazakh citizenship. 5 % indicated that they had already become Russian citizens or have dual citizenship. Among the surveyed students, 29 % have Tajik citizenship, 26 % are from Turkmenistan, 20 % are from Uzbekistan, 14 % are from Kazakhstan, while 9 % are the citizens of Kyrgyzstan. Such a distribution is quite explicable. Since Tajikistan and Uzbekistan provide the largest overall flow of migrants to Russia,¹ it is consequent that a large number of attendees from these countries

study at Russian universities. For example, in 2018, a total of 34,700 citizens of Tajikistan and 34,200 citizens of Uzbekistan studied in Russian universities.²

Despite the closed nature of its political system and society, Turkmenistan sends its citizens to study in the Russian Federation according to a state-approved list of foreign universities that Turkmen applicants are permitted to enter. This has been noted by representatives of Russian universities that have large numbers of Turkmen students.³ This is mainly due to the country's interest in training future graduates at familiar and well-recommended universities. In 2018, the total number of students from this Central Asian state at Russian universities was around 40,000.⁴ At the same time, as a member of the Turkmen diaspora in Moscow noted in an interview, there is practically no labour migration from this country to Russia. However, there are still some cases where a Turkmen citizen comes to Russia for an extended period of time.

¹ Rubinov I. The Impact of Migration and Remittances on Natural Resources in Tajikistan // CIFOR Occasional Paper. 2016. No. 164. P. 5–10. URL: https://www.cifor.org/publications/pdf_files/OccPapers/OP-164.pdf (accessed: 09.06.2022). See also: (Kazantsev & Gusev, 2018; Zanca, 2018; Ikromov, 2019; Komarovskiy, 2020; Yugai, 2022).

² In 2018, Around 212 Thousand Students from the Countries of Central Asia Studied in Russia // ANO “Commonwealth of the Peoples of Eurasia.” February 27, 2019. (In Russian). URL: <http://evrazia-ural.ru/novosti/v-2018-g-v-rossii-obuchalis-212-tysyach-studentov-iz-stran-centralnoy-azii> (accessed: 27.08.2021).

³ Ibid.

⁴ From an interview with a representative of the Turkmen diaspora in Russia, conducted by the authors during field research.

Labour migration from Kazakhstan is also relatively insignificant. In terms of education, this country is increasingly competing directly with Russia for high school graduates in order to avoid losing its young population (Lysenko, 2016). However, Kazakhstan's own education system, which is largely oriented towards the West, differs from Russia's (Ospanova, 2015). Therefore, although the number of Kazakh students in the Russian Federation is generally the highest among all Central Asian countries (86,500 in 2018),⁵ numerous representatives of Russian universities noted in our surveys that this number is currently decreasing. In 2020–2022 this couldn't be attributed to the pandemic, which had a greater impact on labour migration (Ryazantsev, Vazirov & Garibova, 2020), as students still have the option of distance learning. Rather, it is due to students choosing alternative educational paths, including universities in the United States, Europe and China. According to our observations, the representatives of the Russian-speaking community of Kazakhstan generally come for extended periods of study, while Kazakh-speaking youths more often come to Russia through temporary network programmes.

The number of labour migrants from Kyrgyzstan holds the third position after Tajikistan and Uzbekistan. While there are

not many students from this country in Russia on the whole (In 2018, there were 16,600⁶), their number is steadily growing (Arefiev & Derbisheva, 2020). Finally, 2 % of respondents who came from Central Asian countries have so far received Russian citizenship or already had dual citizenship.

Results and Discussion

Firstly, here will be considered the data obtained on the level of education of migrants. 100 % of the respondents had completed secondary education. The students were receiving higher education in Russia at the time of the study. Among labour migrants, however, only 33 % of respondents had already got higher education, while 12 % were receiving it in Russia. The remaining 55 % neither have nor received higher education, which suggests a lack of incentive on the part of employers, despite it being necessary.

Furthermore, we examined the educational component that motivates people to migrate. In the questionnaire, we asked what the main reasons were for choosing Russia, and a particular city, as a place to live, work or study. The results are presented in Table.

Main Reason for Choosing Russia and a Particular City to Live/Work/Study in, % of Respondents

No.	Value	Migrant workers	Students
1	Recommended by relatives	32	24
2	Joining family / friends living in Russia	25	10
3	Good job offer	23	1
4	Choice of university based on recommendations from acquaintances	10	41
5	Selecting a university according to international rankings	7	20
6	Other	3	4
TOTAL		100	100

Source: compiled by K.G. Muratshina and M.V. Valeeva.

⁵ In 2018, Around 212 Thousand Students from the Countries of Central Asia Studied in Russia // ANO "Commonwealth of the Peoples of Eurasia." February 27, 2019. (In Russian). URL: <http://evrazia-ural.ru/novosti/v-2018-g-v-rossii-obuchalis-212-tysyach-studentov-iz-stran-centralnoy-azii> (accessed: 27.08.2021).

⁶ Ibid.

Respondents who selected the ‘Other’ option cited the following reasons, respondents cited receiving a quota for education, admission to the university on a budgetary basis, an acceptable cost of education, a desire to receive an education in the Russian language, proximity to their hometown, or just a desire to study in Russia in a particular city and university.

An interesting trend can be traced in the range of answers. While personal relationships and recommendations remain the key factor in choosing a place of study, international

university rankings have begun to demonstrate a significant influence on the decisions of Central Asian students, albeit to a lesser extent than those of other groups of foreign students in Russia (see, e.g.: (Antonova, Purgina & Polyakova, 2019; Antonova et al., 2021)). Moreover, this suggests that the Russian education system maintains its traditional popularity and reputation among the residents of Central Asian countries.

Next, we asked the respondents to rate their level of proficiency in the Russian language. The results are shown in Figures 5 and 6.

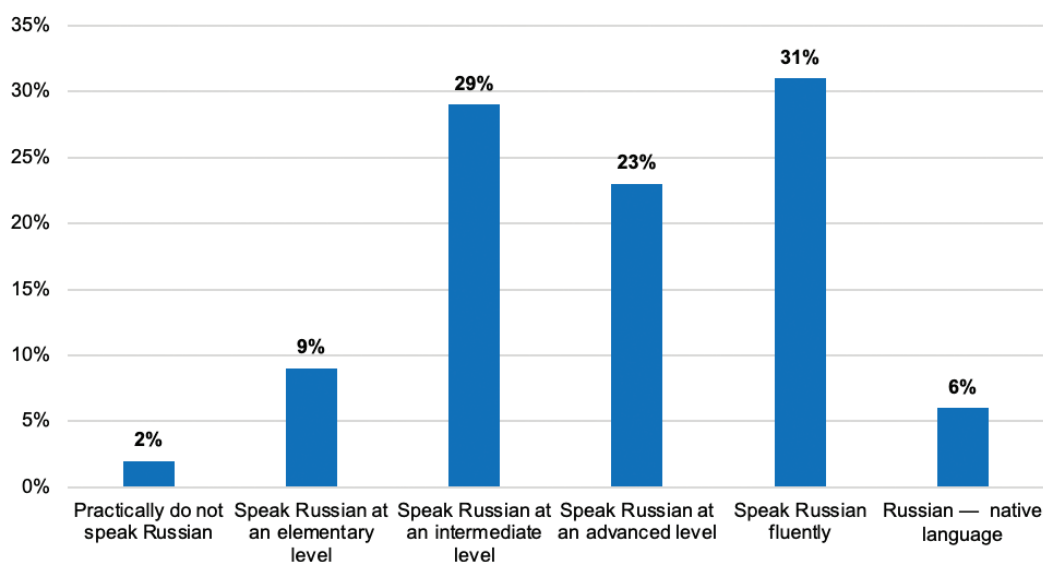


Figure 5. Labour Migrants' Self-Assessment of Russian Language Command

Source: compiled by K. G. Muratshina and M. V. Valeeva.

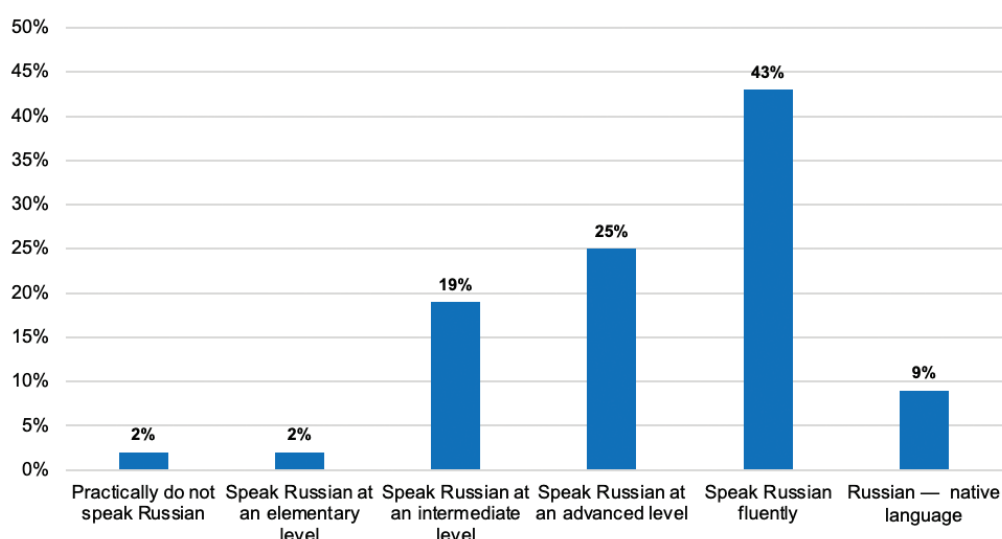


Figure 6. Students' Self-Assessment of Russian Language Command

Source: compiled by K. G. Muratshina and M. V. Valeeva.

In both cases, it can be seen that fewer than half of the respondents consider themselves to be fluent in Russian. Although a significant number of respondents considers themselves able to read and communicate on general topics without apparent difficulty, according to our observations, there are more respondents who do not know Russian well than the number of those who indicated it in their answers. Additionally, during the exchange of views by representatives of the many universities in which surveys were conducted, it was noted that many students from Central Asia lack knowledge of the Russian language.

Researchers have already noted the deteriorating situation regarding Russian language learning in Central Asia.⁷ Despite the bilateral cooperation with Russia in this area, and the desire of many citizens to provide their children with a Russian-language education, the region's states' language policies often

fail to promote the widespread dissemination of Russian, or do not promote it sufficiently.

Undoubtedly, all migrants to the Russian Federation, whether labour or educational, must gain competency in the Russian language before entering the country. Nevertheless, an attempt was made to find out whether those who indicated a lack of knowledge of Russian, address this through a study of the language while working and/or studying in the Russian Federation. The results are represented in Figures 7 and 8.

The insufficient knowledge of the Russian language will inevitably lead to industrial defects and violations of safety regulations. Even obtaining the citizenship of the Russian Federation does not necessarily imply that a person is a native or simply fluent Russian speaker. Therefore, even among those who have already received citizenship, there is a significant need for ongoing language learning.

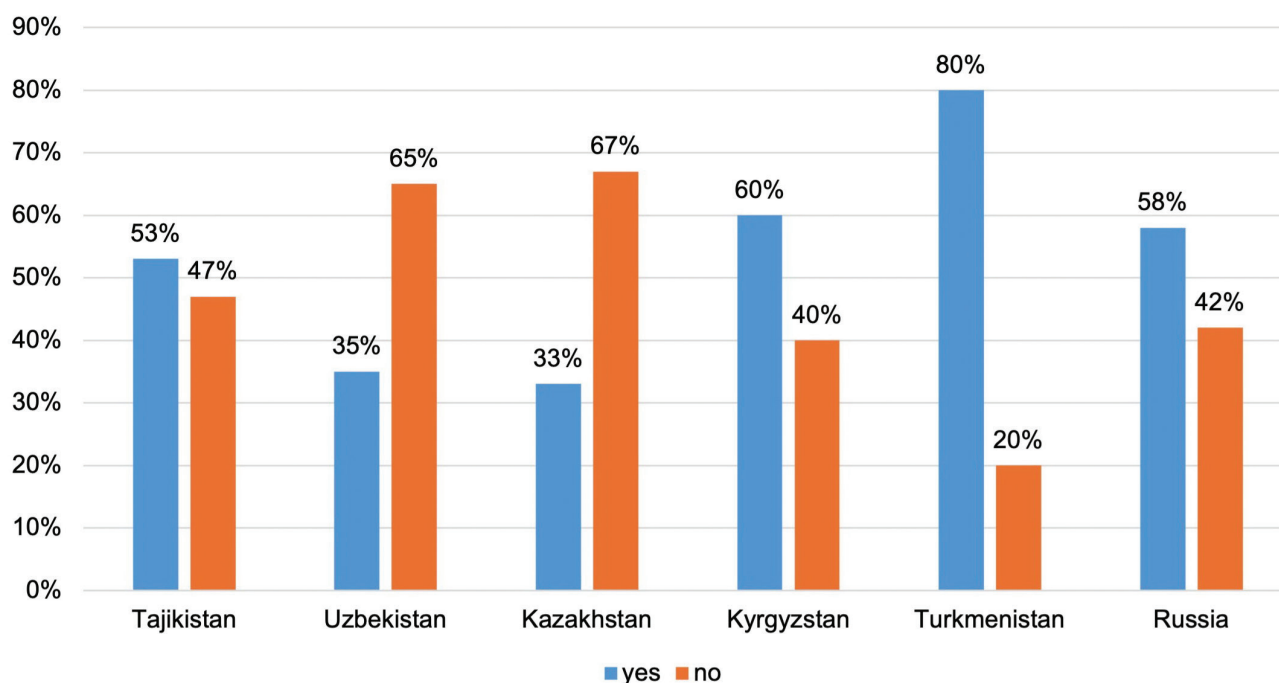


Figure 7. Number of Labour Migrants, Continuing the Study of the Russian Language in Russia

Source: compiled by K. G. Muratshina and M. V. Valeeva.

⁷ See: Bekburzaev N. The Situation of the Russian Language in the Countries of Central Asia // CABAR. February 28, 2019. (In Russian). URL: https://cabar.asia/ru/polozenie-russkogo-yazyka-v-stranah-tsentralnoj-azii/#_ftn9 (accessed: 01.08.2021); Half of Central Asia No Longer Speaks Russian // Russkiy Mir Foundation. March 15, 2019. (In Russian). URL: https://www.russkiymir.ru/publications/253781/?sphrase_id=1006429 (accessed: 23.04.2020). See also: (Fierman, 2009; Borishpolets, 2014; Letnyakov, 2015; Rutland & Kazantsev, 2016; Suleimenova, 2020; Yu, 2020).

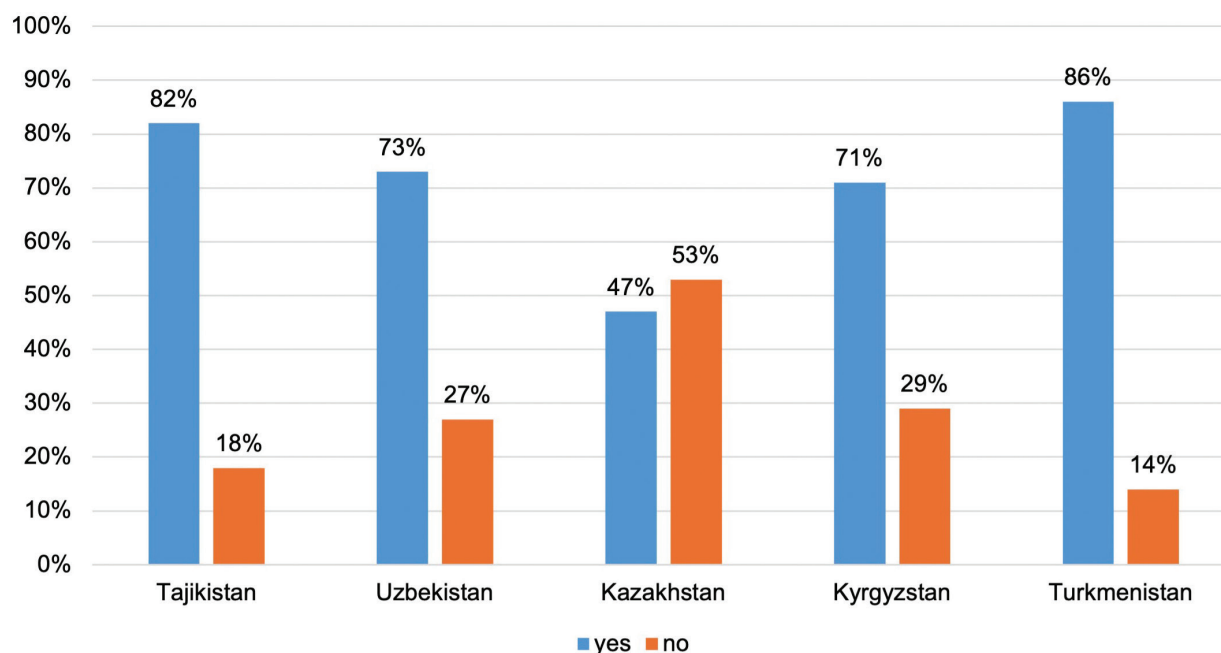


Figure 8. Number of Students, Continuing the Study of the Russian Language in Russia

Source: compiled by K. G. Muratshina and M. V. Valeeva.

Finally, the respondents were asked questions about plans for the future (Figures 9 and 10). It turned out that most of the respondents would like to live in Russia in the future. While this can be explained by the difficult economic

situation in the Central Asian countries, it does not align with migrants' limited proficiency in the Russian language and the small proportion of migrant workers wishing to receive higher education.

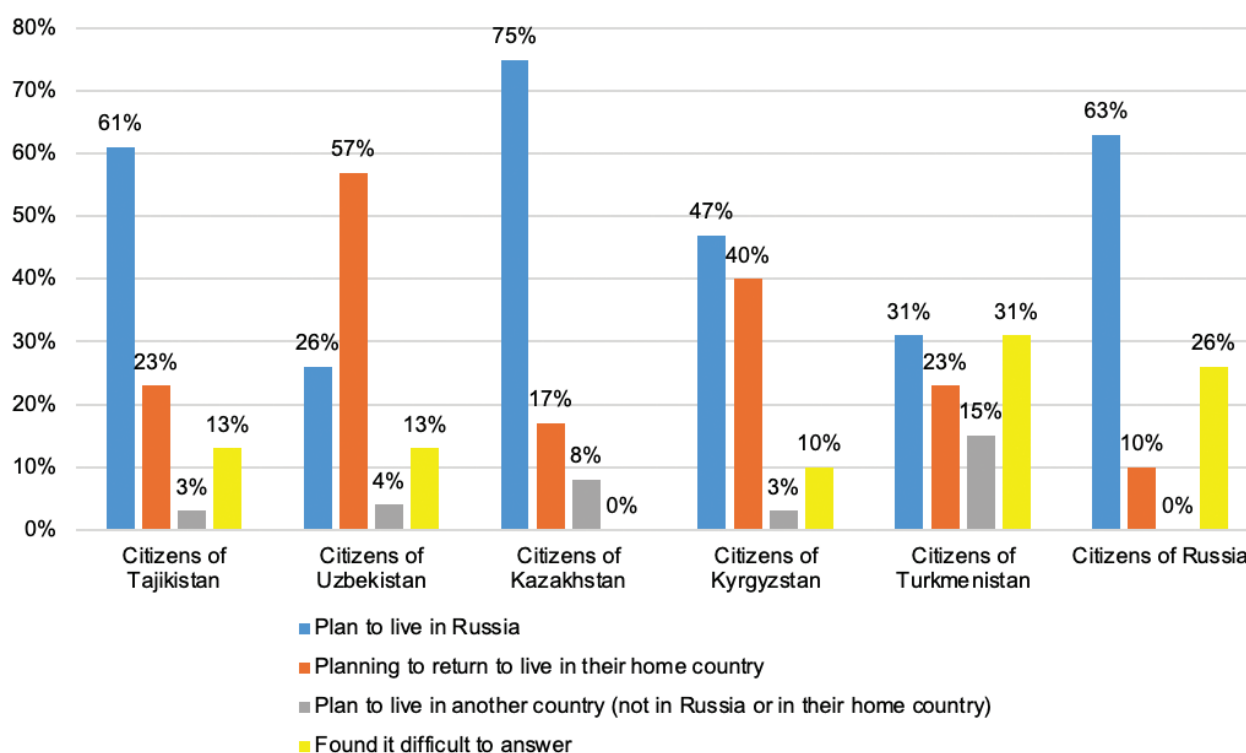


Figure 9. Future Planning of Labour Migrants

Source: compiled by K. G. Muratshina and M. V. Valeeva.

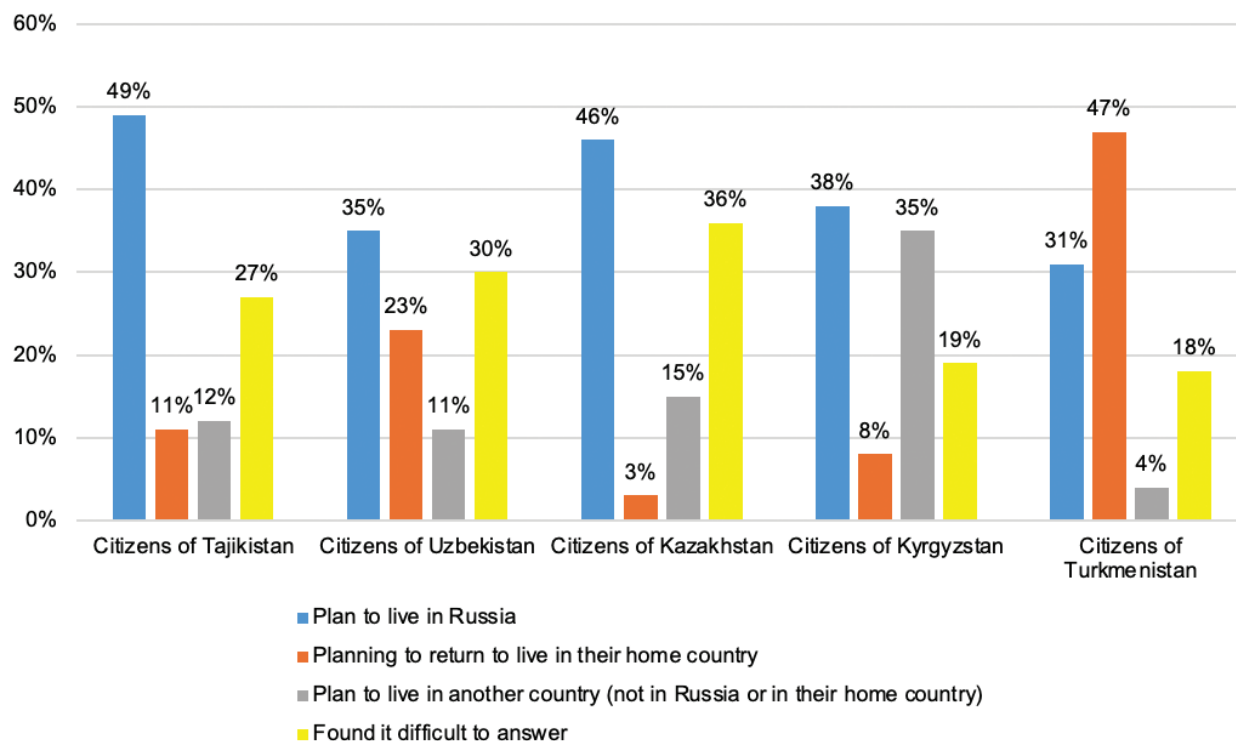


Figure 10. Future Planning of Students

Source: compiled by K.G. Muratshina and M.V. Valeeva.

The majority of respondents' desire to live and work in Russia reflects the current situation in most Central Asian states, which can be characterised as economic dependence on migration flows (Kurylev et al., 2018). In fact, the countries which direct their labour "for export" do not appear to be interested in taking significant actions to change their economic model that has developed in this way, to modernise their industrial capacities and restore enterprises that have collapsed after the USSR breakdown, or to increase funding for the science and educational area, healthcare, etc.

Another question asked of the respondents concerned their plans for further education. Among labour migrants without higher education, only 30 % plan to obtain it. Of these, 63 % would like to study in Russia, 33 % in their home country and 4% in another country. These figures suggest the continuing attractiveness of the Russian education system for migrants, but also the disappointing fact that most do not plan to receive higher education.

Among the students, 22 % of those who study at bachelor's programmes plan to enter

master programmes in Russia, while 2 % of undergraduates plan to enter a Russian postgraduate program. While these figures may seem modest, it is worth remembering that students often do not choose where to study independently. For example, their parents may have already decided that they should either get a job immediately after completing their bachelor's degree or study for a master's degree in the West or China. Moreover, although Russian universities are certainly interested in inviting bachelor graduates to study at master school, offering many meaningful and competitive master level programs, it is clear that foreign students' trajectories in this respect are not only determined by the quality or level of Russian education, which is valued all over the world, but to a larger extent by a set of subjective attitudes.

Conclusion

The findings of the research allow the following conclusions to be drawn.

First of all, it should be noted that the educational level of labour migrants coming

to Russia is low. Russian society increasingly voices concerns and views regarding the need to reduce labour immigration and employment in the previously occupied niches of the labour market by our own citizens with technical or other specialised education who can work with special equipment, as well as the need to increase wages, going hand in hand with the imperative to restore the youth's respect to working professions.

In addition to comprehensively assessing the requirement to attract labour migrants in each particular case, the state should tighten the control of this area by obliging employers, far before the migrant worker or student leave their countries, to conduct a transparent and clear selection of applicants for employment, based on their level of education and their knowledge of the Russian language, history and culture, far exceeding the simplest tests that are now offered for the exam before obtaining a permit. From the perspective of the interests and well-being of the population, it is crucial for the Russian Federation to select only candidates with unique qualifications and the motivation to further improve their education, even if there is a need to import personnel from abroad.

Furthermore, it is necessary to oblige the employers to monitor the advanced training of migrant specialists, to ensure their further education and integration into society, as well as the absence of confrontation and conflicts. This requires strict state supervision of both the preparation and implementation of testing for working permits and the fulfilment of requirements for the education of employees

by employers. In addition to Russian language courses for working permit applicants, specialised training programmes in professional areas and general social science programmes focusing on Russian history and culture should be developed. This work will ensure the fulfilment of the task of “social and cultural adaptation” of migrants, as set out in the Concept of the State Migration Policy of the Russian Federation for 2019–2025.

Besides, more stringent requirements should be imposed for the level of knowledge of the Russian language when recruiting applicants to universities. Here, in Russian is necessary not only for successfully mastering the curriculum, but also for normal socialisation in the host society.

Finally, Russia needs to continue developing its cooperation with Central Asian countries in secondary and higher education, in addition to its ongoing work with other international partners. This cooperation should focus on assisting partners with teaching the Russian language in schools, providing educational literature and advanced teacher training, and encouraging collaboration between pedagogical universities. This will raise awareness among potential applicants of educational opportunities in Russia. People-to-people exchanges play a major role in overcoming social constructs such as stereotypes and limitations, promoting better mutual understanding between peoples, expanding cultural horizons, preventing crimes and conflicts, and ensuring the quality performance of workers' professional activities.

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