

Tajiks Face New Obstacles to Work in Russia

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New work-permit and passport rules could encourage illegal immigration, but there are higher penalties for those who are caught.

New regulations introduced by Moscow this month are likely to make it harder for Tajik labour migrants to work in Russia, as they will have to collect more documents, sit tests, and apply for a work permit promptly. Failure to do so could lead to them being deported and barred from coming back for up to ten years.

The tougher rules govern nationals of countries outside the Eurasian Economic Union, which came into being on January 1 and includes Russia, Belarus, Kazakhstan and Armenia. Kyrgyzstan is due to join in May.

Tajikistan is heavily reliant on labour migration to Russia, and the remittances sent home by expats are equivalent to around half the country's gross domestic product.

"At least 1.5 million of our citizens are in Russia as labour migrants," said Qaromat Sharipov, head of the Tajik Labour Migrants movement. "Some 80 per cent of labour migrants have between two and eight dependants relying on them."

These are huge figures for a country of around eight million people.

Tajikistan nationals used to be able to enter Russia carrying only their domestic IDs, but now they will need an international passport. The Russian authorities have also introduced tougher requirements to acquire a work permit, which they now need to obtain within a month of arrival; it used to be three months. Migrant workers from non-Eurasian union states must also undergo a medical check, register with the tax service and pass a test in Russian language and civics. (See [Armenian Expats Face Changing Russian Labour Market](#) on the rules affecting nationals of a Eurasian bloc state.)

Tajiks will also be subject to harsher penalties if they remain in Russia without renewing their right of residence, which is three months at a time. Offenders will face a progression of penalties – overstaying by three months will bring a three-year ban on re-entering Russia, six months means a five-year ban and nine or more months brings a ten-year ban.

Labour migrants and their families back home are already feeling the effects of the Russian economic sanctions. The steep depreciation of the ruble means that the money they send home is worth less when converted into Tajik somonis, while the bleaker economic climate will curtail the numbers of jobs open to them, especially in areas like construction that typically take on foreign manual labour. (See [Tajiks Assess Damage From Ruble Decline](#) on the impact on the domestic economy.)

Mavjuda Azizova, a lawyer with the Tajikistan office of the International Organisation for Migration, said that economic factors alone would not deter people from travelling to Russia.

"The most important thing for labour migrants is to have an opportunity to work and to earn more than they would back home," Azizova said.

As for the falling value of remittances, Azizova said Tajik families would "modify their spending to fit their income".

If anything, she said, the crisis made labour migrants an even more attractive option for Russian employers, since they were cheap to hire.

The tougher criteria for work permits, however, will be harder to overcome. The cost of passports, medical and language tests and satisfying other requirements will mean migrant workers will have to pay out large sums of money before they receive their first pay cheque in Russia. It costs about 100 US dollars to get a basic Tajikistan passport and triple that amount for a biometric one. The total cost of the work permit, medical test, medical insurance and Russian-language certificate comes to more than 200 dollars.

In Tajikistan, the average monthly wage is about 180 dollars, the lowest in the former Soviet Union.

Vladimir Mukomel, an expert in migration and integration processes with the Institute of Sociology in Moscow, said the new requirements might encourage more labour migrants to work illegally. Companies interested in hiring them are unlikely to wait until prospective employees sort out all the necessary paperwork.

“The job will of course be given to someone else, as the employer is not going to wait,” Mukomel said.

Gauhar Juraeva, head of the Moscow-based Migration and Rights organisation, agreed that the extra costs “drive some migrants underground”. She said that many migrants were so focused on maximising their earnings that they saw things like medical insurance as an unnecessary luxury. Unless they were incapacitated, they would not seek treatment at a Russian hospital, preferring to turn to a doctor within the Tajik community who might charge less.

Then there were the costs of taking the exam in Russian language, history and law.

“Many migrants just can’t afford that kind of money,” Juraeva said.

The new rules have not deterred some prospective migrants like Tamila, a 22-year-old mother of two, who still plans to travel to Russia.

“I am going there with my husband and he has relatives in the place we’re going to. Even if we won’t be able to find jobs immediately, my husband’s relatives will support us,” she said.

Askar Tillyakhanov, who works as a minibus driver in Moscow, recently returned to Tajikistan to get a passport for foreign travel. He plans to go back as soon as he gets the document.

“I wouldn’t be able to earn as much here as I do in Russia,” he explained.

As for how he is going to obtain a Russian-language certificate and pass the other tests, he answered, “I’ll do it somehow.”

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