

Article history: Received 4 January 2016; accepted 10 August 2016

Remittances and their social meaning in Tajikistan

Natalia Zotova ^â
Jeffrey H. Cohen [†]

Abstract

In this paper we investigate the growth and use of social remittances in Tajikistan. Russia became the destination country of choice for labor migrants from former Soviet states following the collapse of the Soviet Union in 1991. Tajik migrants also seek new destinations including settlement in the US. International migration to Russia and the US continues to shape economic realities for Tajik communities and migrants. In this paper, we use ethnographic evidence from rural communities in Tajikistan and from Tajik migrants who are settled in major Russian cities as well as New York City, NY to address the role migration plays for families and household and the meaning of social remittances for local communities. We explore the role that remittances play in the changing social landscape of Tajikistan and its local communities.

Keywords: migration; social remittances; Central Asia; Tajikistan.

JEL Classification: F22, F16, F24

Introduction

The concept of social remittances is central for understanding how migrants influence their home societies beyond the money they transfer (Boccagni and Decimo, 2013:1). Coined by Levitt (1998) the concept of social remittances accounts for migration that takes place in transnational social fields that are defined by the movements of individuals, goods, resources and information through space and time (Levitt and Lamba-Nieves, 2011:3; Levitt and Lamba-Nieves,

^â Natalia Zotova, PhD Candidate, Department of Anthropology, 4034 Smith Laboratory, 174 W. 18th Avenue, Columbus, OH 43210-1106, United States.
E-mail: zotova.1@osu.edu.

[†] Jeffrey H. Cohen, Professor in the Department of Anthropology, 4034 Smith Laboratory, 174 W. 18th Avenue, Columbus, OH 43210-1106, United States.
E-mail: cohen.319@osu.edu.

Acknowledgement: Partial support from the Mershon Center for International Security Studies, Ohio State University is gratefully acknowledged.



2013:20). Migrants remit more than money; they contribute to the everyday life values, attitudes and practices of their home societies (Boccagni and Decimo, 2013:2) and in the process they produce change.

We use the analytical framework of social remittances to explore the value and use of migrants' returns in Tajikistan. Tajik migrants remit monetary and non-monetary support that is shared with sending households and origin communities. We aim at understanding the meaning, associated with remittance practices and argue that the importance of remittances extends beyond the money that migrants return. We use ethnographic evidence from rural communities in Tajikistan and from Tajik migrants who are settled in Russian cities and New York City to address the role migration plays for families and household and that support and transform the Tajik economy. By exploring the case of Tajikistan we contribute to the scholarship in migration and social remittances.

Background

Tajikistan is located in Central Asia; it borders two other Central Asian states (Kyrgyzstan and Uzbekistan), China (to the east) and Afghanistan (to the south) (Map 1).

Map 1. Tajikistan and Central Asian countries.



Tajikistan has a population of 8.2 million people; and is ranked by the World Bank as a low income country, where GDP per capita was \$990 in 2013 (World Development Indicators 2015). The country's infrastructure was defined largely by Soviet run production facilities and five year plans that limited local decision making and that



encouraged mono-cropping and mining (Dana, 2002). The economy was further limited upon Tajikistan's independence in 1991 by the country's lack of financial resources and a civil war that began in 1992 and continued through 1997 (Nourzhanov and Bleuer, 2013).

Scarce opportunities at home combined with the insecurity created around the civil war drove Tajik migration following the Soviet Union's collapse. Soviet era passport controls had limited Tajik migration in the past and often created opportunities only around education, organized employment or military service. Upon the Soviet Union's breakup Russia became the destination country of choice for labor migrants from former Soviet states (Heleniak, 2008; Abashin, 2014), and Tajik migrants founded their routes based in the historical relationship of their country and Russia (Zotova, 2006).

Tajik migrants destined for Russian cities often settled for low skilled, marginal jobs and typically worked without papers creating additional insecurities even as their earnings increased (Human Rights Watch, 2010). The number of Tajik migrants in Russia increased over time: the statistics of Federal Migration Service tells of 863,000 Tajikistan natives in Russia (FMS, 2015). Some migrants seeking new and more diverse opportunities are moving into new urban centers in the US including New York City (Zotova and Cohen, 2015).

Remittances play a central role in Tajikistan's economic life (Danzer and Ivaschenko, 2010). The World Bank ranks the nation as the most remittance-dependent country in the world where the inward remittance flow was \$3.8 billion in 2014, accounting for 41.7% of the country's GDP (Migration and Remittances, 2016).

Settling in the destination countries

Tajik migrants who settle in Russia typically experience difficult working conditions and most often find employment in the context of the "grey" (informal) market where a worker's problematic status vis-à-vis passport controls leave them vulnerable to abuse and discrimination (Human Rights Watch, 2010). Research on Central Asian migrants in Russia indicate that they are marginalized and collectively represented as "others" and "blacks" in the public opinion and media (Regamey, 2010; Reeves, 2013). Regardless of the challenges that movers face in relation to their status and changing opportunities for employment Tajiks continue to settle in Russia.

Tajik migrants in the US face new and different challenges from their compatriots in Russia as many are undocumented and employment can be difficult to find. Yet, some challenges are constant, including shifting modes of legality, hard working and living conditions as well as low wages. Increasing migrantophobia and Islamophobia in the

context of anti-migrant nationalistic rhetoric in Russia (Regamey, 2010; Schnirelman, 2011; Dannreuther and March, 2010; Mukomel, 2014) as well as tense relations between the US and Russia also influence outcomes for Tajik migrants. While some Tajiks are seeking new voices and create informal institutions or cultural associations, or participate in festivals as a means to maintain social connections and mitigate the stress of relocation (Le Huérou, 2014; Zotova and Cohen, 2015), in both Russia and the US the majority of Tajik migrants elect to work in the informal economy and live quietly on the margins of mainstream society.

The money these migrants remit whether from Russia or the US, and regardless of its legality, holds important symbolic value and is celebrated in the home as remittances become a part of Tajik life. Remittances represent traditions of support for both migrants and non-migrants. Migrants are able to mediate their marginal identities and build their social worth vis-à-vis mainstream society as they remit, and sending households are able to make sense of the migrations and sometimes challenging behaviors of movers as they access remittances and apply them to daily life, business expansions and home building.

The value of remittances

Migration is complex and expensive for Tajik movers. There are the costs associated with moving that increase as more geographic and socio-cultural borders are negotiated. While rough estimates show that Tajik migrants typically spend 65-70% of their earnings in Russia (Zotova, 2006), the social remittances that are returned are often priceless. In other words, while Tajik migrants remit only a small part of their earnings, the money, knowledge and connections that are transferred are of critical importance to the sending households' budgets and members; and the community as a whole.

The flow of remittances from Tajik migrants in Russia to their hometowns is materialized in the form of new houses, cars, electric appliances, furniture, clothes and bride wealth among other things. This process is not unique for Tajikistan. Research in many parts of the world reveals a global pattern where remittances are turned into material symbols of success and serve to improve living conditions, enhance well-being and engage migrants in the social life of their sending households and communities (Cohen and Sirkeci, 2011, Reeves, 2009; 2012).

The important role that Tajik remittances play is clear on both meso- and macro-economic levels. Nationally, remittances have led to poverty reduction within the country on a grand scale, and the World



Bank notes that Tajikistan is among the top 10% of poverty reducing countries over the last the past 15 years (World Bank, 2015:4; Danzer and Ivaschenko, 2010:190). As important are those remittances earmarked for sending homes and non-migrants. Kireyev (2006) notes remittances are a particularly efficient source of funds for development as senders and recipients avoid problematic (and often fraudulent) banks and their staffs and chose to instead channel their money directly to projects.

Sending households and their members also benefit from the information, connections and relationships that migrants create with others and that become important resources for future migrants as well as the current mover. Migrants can use his or her actions to create an identity rooted in local traditions and reject images that the destination state may create of the “dangerous mover” who is set to steal jobs and destabilize national life. Thus, we can argue that while remittances have led to an increase in material wealth among sending households and the creation of a process that typically influences a sending household's overall social status, Tajik migration also benefits migrants and non-migrants as their status increases in relation to normative and expected behaviors. In other words, beyond economics, remittances outcomes change the well-being of Tajik households and enhance the status of their members (whether migrating or not), creating a sense of belonging, value and worth that is defined following culturally grounded ideals. The economic value and cultural place of the remittances returned to sending communities is particularly important when migrants who are central to the social life of their sending communities are redefined as dangerous and criminal at points of destination (Cohen, 2005; Regamey, 2010).

Remittances do not simply appear with a promise of support from the mover to his or her sending household. The growth of available capital brings changes that may not be anticipated as needs, demands and tastes shift. Beyond investing in the household, home construction, remittances can change consumer patterns and lead to new desires and new expenses. Remittances may support decisions beyond everyday expenses. For example, narratives of migration included some of the elderly members of sending households who noted that they were able to perform a *hadj* with the help of their sons.¹ New consumption patterns often conspire with personal drives and

¹ Hadj, pilgrimage to Mecca, is considered one of the pillars of Islam, and is of importance in local communities.

household needs to encourage new migrations and to meet increased social expectations.

Remittances also become ways for Tajik migrants living abroad to maintain their connections as well as a sense of value as they are settling in systems at points of destination that can be quite discriminatory (Massey, 1993; Waldinger, 2015). For instance, migration to the US and large urban centers on the east coast—particularly New York City is still relatively new; and remittances from the movers in these new destinations are irregular. Tajiks in New York City often remit small amounts as they balance the demands of their new hometowns and the high cost of living in the US. It is the value of movement to the US itself, rather than expectations around remittances that transform statuses for household members who are left-behind. And as connections continue to build between Tajikistan and the US, we can expect that the pioneers we interviewed around this project will be followed as friends and relatives join them.

Entrepreneurship

Migration also creates opportunities that shift remittance practices and outcomes toward new pathways to success and status: Tajik migrants may use their earnings to start businesses. Some of them earmark remittances to purchase vans or trucks, and focus on commercial deliveries with a business built around their sending homes and extended family and friends. These return migrants use their new trucks and vans to transport locally grown food products to markets in larger cities and urban centers, and to deliver consumer goods to rural villages creating opportunities for new patterns of consumption. Other Tajik migrants set up businesses along major and big roads throughout the nation and create opportunities to sell goods to passing countrymen and women. Successful migrants with money to invest can and do invest their Russian-earned capital in construction or purchase of big and small convenience stores, or even stall at local markets. Setting up a small business by return migrants becomes a way to earn status (on Mexican examples see Acheson, 1972). The investment in a small business is a statement that the owner is an educated and civilized person; and allows him to distinguish himself from the community of rural farmers. The investment creates a sense of accomplishment and success for the migrant, and allows him to overcome the negative feelings of discrimination in Russia by socializing the earnings into an elevated social status.

Parviz traveled to Russia for 10 years and worked at different construction sites. On his return to Tajikistan, he opened a large shop selling food products, clothes and footwear, household goods and furniture. He had two wives, which was also a marker of his high social



status. Parviz explained the connections between migrants, their families and local businesses. Families use remittance to buy necessary goods, and revenues of shop owners also depend on the money that the customers can spend. Parviz said:

When do I do good business? When guys earn well in Russia, and send money home. In times of crisis my business goes worse. Every family has a son, who works in Russia. Men from our village mainly go to St.-Petersburg. Young men go to earn for their wedding, a house, a car. Earlier, in 1998, for instance, when we migrated and then returned home, everyone was curious – what is it like there in Russia? Nowadays every man goes there, and they send money back home.

Social changes in local communities

Opportunities for new investments by the members of sending households also tend to change traditional Tajik reciprocal behaviors as movers and non-movers shift away from social practices that are rooted in the past and expectations of the elderly and toward new possibilities that become socially accepted. *Khashar* (communal labor, when residents come together to do hard and time-consuming irrigation or agricultural work) is an example of this shift. Villagers typically gather to perform *khashar* and provide free assistance around building, construction and more to their kin and neighbors. This practice has centuries-long history in local communities of Central Asia (Abdulkhamidov, 1981). Nowadays the growing demand for construction work and opportunities around construction projects fuels work specialization and a division of labor that makes *khashar* difficult to engage and maintain without some changes. In response to new work regimes, communal labor among Tajik is changing and in some places, disappearing or being replaced by monetary (contractual) relationships built around an individual's specific construction skills.

The ways in which *khasar* is changing signifies a change in the organization of labor within Tajik society and the development of new social fields that define social integration, identity and belonging (see also Paarregaard, 2014 on discussion of Peruvian migration). Relatives may provide some help with the construction, however paid services mainly replace communal work. As one respondent put it: "It is such time nowadays. No one will be surprised even if a son asks the father to pay for his help". Social fields shift practices and fuel broader spatial connections between local communities: people may invite construction masters from different regions of the country. Payment for services, even among close relatives, becomes socially accepted.

While migration creates important opportunities for migrants and their families, it can also change social statuses, marginalizing those who cannot participate in migration. Migrants' households gain financial, social and symbolic resources, associated with migration. Nevertheless, some households may not be able to send their members overseas for one reason or another and have low socio-economic status vis-à-vis other households. These can be nuclear families, which live separately from parents and have small children. If a man travels abroad from a nuclear family, it is difficult for his wife, who must cope with a household on her own, to do all work in the household; take care of small children and do seasonal agricultural work. Some informants mentioned other reasons, and spoke about their relatives and friends who went to Russia once or twice and later stopped migrating because it was hard to adapt to conditions in their new homes and they could not adjust to hard work, very long hours, bad living conditions and hostility of Russian natives (see also Kunuroglu et al., 2015 for cross-national evidence from Turkish-Germany migration).

International migration and remittances produce other social outcomes, including changes in perceived social, gender and family norms, releasing pressure and expectations from some members of the communities, and placing them on the other. In communities with traditions of arranged marriage, parents are responsible for a complex of duties, related to marriage of their offspring. They accumulate resources to pay the bride price and bride fortune; to organize and fund the wedding, and provide housing for a young couple. With development of international labor migration from Tajikistan to Russia parents are likely to place responsibilities, connected with marriage and housing, on their sons. Parents may allocate the land for construction of a house and provide assistance with some costs of the wedding. However, they expect young men to earn for major expenses independently through multiple moves to Russia. Members of rural communities judge success of transborder migration and social status of the family upon ability to organize an impressive wedding celebration and purchase required goods and appliances (Reeves, 2009). Another important measure of perceived success is construction of a house for a new family.

It is clear that Tajik remittances decisions are not made in a vacuum, rather members of the household (migrants/non-migrants and extended family) are involved in negotiations over the use and role of remittances. While it may seem obvious that important decisions like construction of a new house for married sons or costly purchases of larger appliances are often the site of difficult and lengthy discussions,



debates can also rage around much less complex and costly expenses including the costs of education for children that can test cultural values and challenge traditional practices (including arranged marriages). Building a home, changes in residential patterns, and the purchase of big and small items symbolize not only economic success of migration for the members of the local community but are indicators of the residential dynamic that acquires independent and new value changing the very way Tajik families and households organize themselves.

The changes in the structure of marriage and residential patterns create new opportunities to define status and to think about personal, communal and religious expectations. Monetary remittances become socialized in local communities through transformation of practices: growing number of guests at weddings and other celebrations together with the spiraling costs of gifts and other expenses directly connect money with the sense of accomplishment of migration. Interestingly enough, the national governments (in Tajikistan and Uzbekistan as well) reacted to these transformations, associated with the meaning of remittances for local societies, by imposing regulations on the number of guests at weddings and overall costs of lavish celebrations (Babadjanov, 2012:101; see also discussion of the Uzbekistan case in Abashin, 2003). The actions of the state in contrast with local practices demonstrate how remittances are socialized at different levels, starting from the micro-level of local practices to the macro-level that is defined by legislative acts.

Conclusion

In the paper we discussed the value of remittances for Tajik migrants, their families and local communities. Remittances include money that migrants return to the sending households; however, its meaning extends beyond the monetary support. Boccagni and Decimo call for distinguishing between economic and social remittances: since the value of money is connoted by the social meanings diffused through it, the concept of social remittances allows for a broader framework than the economic remittance (2013:5). Conceptualizing social remittances through the case study of Tajikistan, we show how remittances are internalized in the social life of local communities by sustaining and shifting statuses, creating opportunities and defining new expectations around international migration. Large international migration from Tajikistan has developed over a short historic span, but it has important social outcomes. By investigating the changing structure and meaning of remittances at the local level, we call attention to these dynamics and connect sending and destination

communities; and contribute to the broader scholarship in migration and social remittances.

References

- Abashin, S. (2014). Migration from Central Asia to Russia in the New Model of World Order. *Russian Politics & Law* 52(6): 8-23.
- Abashin, S. (2003). "Beyond the Common Sense? On the Problem of (Ir)Rational Ritual Expenses in Central Asia". In Panarin, S. (ed.) *Eurasia. People and Myths*. Moscow: Natalis. P.217-238.
- Acheson, J.M. (1972). "Accounting Concepts and Economic Opportunities in a Tarascan Village: Emic and Etic Views". *Human Organization*, 31(1): 83-91.
- Babadjanov, R. (ed.) (2012). *The Social Problems and Human Capital Development in the Republic of Tajikistan*. Dushanbe: Farzin.
- Boccagni, P. and Decimo, F. (2013). "Mapping social remittances". *Migration Letters*, 10(1):1-10.
- Conway, D., Cohen, J.H. (1998). "Consequences of Migration and Remittances for Mexican Transnational Communities". *Economic Geography* 74(1):26-44.
- Cohen, J. H. (2005). *The Culture of Migration in Southern Mexico*. Austin: University of Texas Press.
- Cohen, Jeffrey H. and I. Sirkeci. (2011). *Cultures of Migration: The Global Nature of Contemporary Mobility*. Austin: University of Texas Press.
- Dana, L.P. (2002). *When Economies Change Paths. Models of Transition in China, the Central Asian Republics, Myanmar and the Former Indochine Francais*. Singapore: World Scientific Publishing.
- Dannreuther, R. and March, L. (eds.) (2010). *Russia and Islam: State, Society and Radicalism*. London: Taylor and Francis.
- Danzer, A., & Ivaschenko, O. (2010). Migration patterns in a remittances dependent economy: Evidence from Tajikistan during the global financial crisis. *Migration Letters*, 7(2), 190-202. Retrieved from <http://tplondon.com/journal/index.php/ml/article/view/190>
- FMS [Federal Migration Service of the Russian Federation]. (2015). "Statistics on Foreign Nationals Residing in the Russian Federation." Retrieved from http://www.fms.gov.ru/about/activity/stats/Statistics/Svedenija_v_otnoshenii_inostrannih_grazh/item/5850/ . Retrieved March 18, 2016 (in Russian)
- Heleniak, T. (2008). An Overview of Migration in the Post-Soviet Space. Chapter 1 in *Migration, Homeland and Belonging in Eurasia*, Cynthia Buckley and Blair Ruble (eds). Woodrow Wilson Center Press: Washington, DC and Johns Hopkins University Press: Baltimore, pp. 29-67.
- Human Rights Watch. (2010). "Are You Happy to Cheat Us?" *Exploitation of Migrant Construction Workers in Russia*. New York: Human Rights Watch.
- Le Huérou, A. (2014). "Labour Migrations in the Omsk Region: Administrative and Economic Workforce Management Practices and Construction of New Social Relations". In Hohmann, S. Mouradian, Serrano and Thorez (eds.). *Development in Central Asia and the Caucasus. Migration*,



- Democratisation and Inequality in the Post-Soviet Era*, London: Tauris, p. 264-288.
- Kireyev, A. (2006). *The Microeconomics of Remittances: The Case of Tajikistan*. International Monetary Fund: Working Paper.
- Kunuroglu, F. et al. (2015). "Consequences of Turkish return migration from Western Europe". *International Journal of Intercultural Relations* 49:198-211.
- Levitt, P., & Lamba-Nieves, D. (2013). Rethinking social remittances and the migration-development nexus from the perspective of time. *Migration Letters*, 10(1), 11-22. Retrieved from <http://www.tplondon.com/journal/index.php/ml/article/view/56>.
- Massey, D. et al. (1993). "Theories of International Migration: A Review and Appraisal". *Population and Development Review* 19(3): 431-66.
- Migration and Remittances Factbook 2016*. (2015). Third Edition. World Bank Group. Global Knowledge Partnership on Migration and Development (KNOMAD).
- Mukomel, V. (ed.) (2014). *Migrants, Migrantophobia and Migration Politics*. Moscow: Academia [in Russian].
- Nourzhanov, K. and Bleuer, C. (2013). *Tajikistan a Political and Social History*. ANU E Press, The Australian National University, Canberra.
- Paerregaard, K. (2014). "Movements, moments and moods. Generation as unity and strife in Peruvian migration". *Ethnic and Racial Studies* 37(11): 2129-2147
- Regamey, A. (2010). "The Image of Migrants and Migration Politics in Russia". *Anthropological Forum* 13: 389-406 [in Russian].
- Rodriguez, L. (2011). "A Note on Social Obligations, Accumulation and the Anti-Cyclical Property of Immigrant Remittances". *International Journal of Humanities and Social Science* 1(10): 52-54.
- Reeves, M. (2009). "Beyond Economic Determinism: Micro-dynamic of Migration from Rural Kyrgyzstan". *Neprikosnovennyi zapas* 4(66) Retrieved from <http://www.nlobooks.ru/rus/nz-online/619/1456/1478/> [in Russian].
- Reeves, M. (2013). Becoming 'Black' in Moscow: Documentary Regimes and Migrant Life in the Shadow of Law. In *Citizenship and Immigration: Conceptual, Historical and Institutional Dimensions*, edited by Vladimir Malakhov. Moscow: Russian Academy of Sciences.
- Reeves, M. (2012). "Black Work, Green Money: Remittances, Ritual, and Domestic Economies in Southern Kyrgyzstan". *Slavic Review* 71(1): 108-134.
- Schnirelman, V. (2011). *"The Threshold of Tolerance": Ideology and Practice of New Racism*. Moscow: NLO [in Russian].
- World Bank (2015). *The World Bank Group. Tajikistan Partnership Program Snapshot*. The World Bank.
- Waldinger, R. (2015). *The Cross-Border Connection Immigrants, Emigrants, and Their Homelands*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press.
- Zotova, N. Cohen, J. (2015). "Insecurity and Risks in the Places of Destination: Central Asian migrants in New York City". The paper presented at the *American Anthropological Association Annual Meeting*, Denver, Colorado. 18-22 November.
- Zotova, N. (2006). Labor Migration from Tajikistan to Russia. Evidence from Moscow and Samara. In A. Vlasov (ed.). *Social and Political Portraits of*

16 Remittances and their social meaning in Tajikistan

Central Asian States. Moscow: Moscow State University, pp.190-211. [in Russian].

