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IMPACT OF THE COVID-19 PANDEMIC ON THE MOBILITIES OF CENTRAL ASIAN MIGRANTS

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Abstract. The COVID-19 pandemic and related restrictive measures introduced in Russia and Central Asian countries have seriously disrupted the mobility patterns of migrant workers from Central Asia. The purpose of this study is to describe the new patterns of mobility that emerged both domestically and internationally during the COVID-19 pandemic, to study the policy measures taken by the governments of Russia and Central Asian states and their consequences for the mobility of migrants from Central Asia. To identify salient pandemic-related events impacting mobility and changing patterns of mobility of Central Asian migrants, the study heavily relied on a combination of pandemic-related official documents and national and regional news media sources.

Key words: *migrants, Central Asia, COVID-19, mobility, Russia*

COVID-19 ПАНДЕМИЯСЫНЫҢ ОРТАЛЫҚ АЗИЯ МИГРАНТТАРЫНЫҢ МОБИЛЬДІЛІГІНЕ ӘСЕРІ

Нурлан Муминов

Аңдатпа. COVID-19 пандемиясы және оған байланысты Ресей мен Орталық Азия елдерінде енгізілген шектеу шаралары Орталық Азиялық еңбек мигранттарының мобильділік үлгілерін елеулі түрде бұзды. Бұл зерттеудің мақсаты – COVID-19 пандемиясы кезінде елішінде және халықаралық деңгейде пайда болған мобильділіктің

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жаңа үлгілерін сипаттау, Ресей мен Орталық Азия мемлекеттерінің үкіметтері қабылдаған саяси шараларды және олардың Орталық Азиялық мигранттардың мобильділігіне әсерін зерттеу. Орталық Азиялық мигранттардың мобильділігіне әсер еткен және мобильділік үлгілерін өзгерткен пандемияға байланысты маңызды оқиғаларды анықтау үшін зерттеу негізінен пандемияға қатысты ресми құжаттар мен ұлттық және аймақтық ақпарат көздеріне сүйенді.

Түйін сөздер: мигранттар, Орталық Азия, COVID-19, мобильділік, Ресей

ВЛИЯНИЕ ПАНДЕМИИ COVID-19 НА МОБИЛЬНОСТЬ МИГРАНТОВ ИЗ ЦЕНТРАЛЬНОЙ АЗИИ

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Аннотация. Пандемия COVID-19 и связанные с ней ограничительные меры, введенные в России и странах Центральной Азии, серьезно нарушили модели мобильности трудящихся-мигрантов из Центральной Азии. Целью данного исследования является описание новых паттернов мобильности, которые возникли как внутри страны, так и на международном уровне во время пандемии COVID-19, изучение политических мер, принятых правительствами России и государств Центральной Азии, и их последствий для мобильности мигрантов из Центральной Азии. Для выявления важных событий, связанных с пандемией, повлиявших на мобильность и изменивших паттернов мобильности мигрантов из Центральной Азии, исследование в значительной степени опиралось на сочетание официальных документов, связанных с пандемией, и национальных и региональных источников новостей в средствах массовой информации.

Ключевые слова: мигранты, Центральная Азия, COVID-19, мобильность, Россия

Introduction

The first cases of COVID-19 were identified in Wuhan City, Hubei Province of China, on December 31, 2019 [1]. Since COVID-19 has hit almost every country in the world, approaching 12.7 million confirmed cases and more than 500.000 deaths reported in 188 countries and territories as of July 12, 2020 [2]. Russian Federation and Central Asian countries were relatively late in suffering a serious outbreak. The first COVID-19 infections in Russia date back to January 31, when

two Chinese citizens tested positive in Tyumen, Siberia, and Chita, Russian Far East [3]. Russia has now become the country with the fourth-most cases in the world, following the United States, Brazil, and India. Altogether, there are more than 700.000 confirmed cases with more than 11.000 deaths in Russia [4].

The COVID-19 pandemic has begun to spread to the Central Asian region, when three cases were finally detected in Kazakhstan on March 13 [4]. Following days Uzbekistan and Kyrgyzstan also

started to report their first COVID-19 cases [5]. Meanwhile in Tajikistan, authorities denied the present of coronavirus within country thus placing populations at risk until first 15 cases have finally identified on April 30 [6]. Unlike most other Central Asian countries, government officials of Turkmenistan still have consistently denied the existence of any cases within its territory [7].

In a bid to curb the spread of the pandemic authorities in Russian Federation and Central Asian countries have launched to implement strict containment measures by closing their borders, declaring a state of emergency and imposing lockdowns. Nevertheless, governments' policy responses to coronavirus in Russian Federation and Central Asia region differ from country to country and have some similarities as well.

The aim of this study is to describe new patterns of mobilities and immobilities that emerged, both internally and internationally, during the COVID-19 pandemic (from January to October 2020), examine policy responses put in place by governments of Russia and Central Asian states and their implications on the mobility of Central Asian migrants. Based on this, the study attempts to answer the following questions: What are the specific characteristics of the policies adopted in the Russian Federation and Central Asian countries? To what extent did the mobility restrictions effect Central Asian migrants?

Research methods

To answer these questions, the study heavily relied on a combination of pandemic-related official local and national documents such as directives and decrees,

reports, and national and regional news media sources issued between March and October 2020 to identify salient pandemic-related events impacted mobility and changed patterns of mobility of Central Asian migrants resulting from the pandemic. Google News Alerts was set to aggregate news media articles discussing COVID-19 and Central Asian migrants, focusing initially on Komsomol'skaya pravda, Kommersant, Novaya Gazeta, Mediazona, RBK, Vlast.Kz, Azattyq, Kun. Uz, Ozodlik, Sputnik Uzbekistana, Khovar.

Government policies

On January 31, immediately after the first COVID-19 infection was reported, the Russian Federation restricting the border with China, introducing quarantines for newcomers [8, 9]. In early March, the Russian government shut down its borders entirely and announced a ban on the entry of foreign nationals and stateless people until May 1 [8]. After Russian authorities banned non-Russian citizens from entering until May 1 due to the coronavirus emergency, dozens of foreigners stranded at Moscow's airports, Domodedovo, Vnukovo, Sheremetyevo and Zhukovsky [10].

Moreover, the Chief Medical Officer of the Russian Federation has issued a series of orders, according to which the heads of the Russian regions are obliged to ensure the isolation of all arrivals for 14 days from the date of arrival and monitoring of the isolation regime. In addition, everyone who arrived in the country was obliged to immediately report their arrival in the Russian Federation, providing quite a lot of personal information – the place and dates of stay abroad, as well as information

about registration and place of actual residence [11].

Regarding the arrival from abroad and the detection of coronavirus infections, The Federal Service for the Oversight of Consumer Protection and Welfare (Rospotrebnadzor) officers carried out a massive epidemiological investigation, including questionnaires at airports and train stations. On 31 March, the Government approved the Provisional Rules for the Recording of Information to Prevent the Spread of a New Coronavirus Infection, which established a centralized data-sharing system. According to this document, when collecting data from an epidemiological anamnesis, it is established that there are foreign trips 14 days before the first symptoms, as well as the presence of close contacts in the last 14 days with persons suspected of being infected, or those whose diagnosis has been confirmed by laboratory [12].

At the end of March, Russian President Vladimir Putin declared paid “*non-working days*” for the whole country from March 30 to May 11 [13]. As a result, the streets of Moscow and other cities were filled with people enjoying their holidays. Later, the Kremlin had to explain that the country was not given a bonus vacation, but simply asked to stay at home [14].

Instead of acting at the national level, the federal authorities have empowered the heads of the regions of the Russian Federation to take their own measures to combat the pandemic. The regions have begun to take decisions by imposing a *heightened state of readiness* and mandatory lockdown due to the threat of the spread of the coronavirus. As part of the measures taken, all schools and

universities switched to distance learning, as well as all mass events were canceled, many businesses and the entire service sector were suspended, and air traffic and free movement of citizens were restricted [15].

The restrictive measures due to the pandemic do not allow many migrants to return home, and they need to pay for housing and either support their family here or support it at home. But in the current crisis, more than 30 per cent of migrants were unemployed, and half of the unemployed had no money for necessities. By mid-May, migrant workers began mobilizing protests and walk-outs against the restrictive measures. For example, on 15 May, in Moscow about 500 migrant workers gathered near the Food-City market after a group of traders asked the market administration to lower their rent, because trade had effectively ceased during the quarantine period. In response, the administration announced an increase in rent prices [16]. On July 17, Moscow and Saint Petersburg held protests by migrant workers demanding payment of salaries. In Moscow, according to RBC, the builders protested at the Sheremetyevo airport. In St. Petersburg protested the builders of the business complex “Lakhta Center.” According to 47 News, several hundred workers who arrived from Central Asia demanded payment of salaries for the spring months [17].

The Russian authorities began massively introducing public video surveillance and facial recognition systems in 2015. Since as part of this program, the Safe City video surveillance system was deployed in all regions of Russia [18]. Today, video surveillance systems with face recognition

are installed in most major cities of the country. The introduction of quarantine has served as a catalyst for the development of all types of tracking, but, above all, digital technologies. Since the beginning of the coronavirus outbreak, Russia has begun to use these technologies to provide quarantine, track carriers of the disease, and even identify new cases of infection. In at least 11 regions, as well as in Crimea, these systems were used to identify quarantine violators. Since March stories have appeared in the Russian media about how the authorities use video surveillance or facial recognition system to identify violators. The facial recognition system was used to catch and punish those who went out to throw out garbage while under home quarantine [19].

The network of video cameras with facial recognition function, which has been introduced in Moscow for several years, now has begun to play a key role in combating the spread of coronavirus. At the end of March, it has been reported that Moscow authorities began to use surveillance system (Safe City) based on NtechLab technologies to track the mobilities of citizens, as well as identify those who violate the quarantine or self-isolation requirements. According to the Moscow Department of information technology, cameras are currently equipped with more than 102 thousand entrances, more than 21 thousand courtyards and more than 4 thousand public places [20].

Trapped migrants at the borders

A key problem faced by migrant workers everywhere is the restriction of mobility and the closure of state borders. In March 2020, the Russian government announced

that all non-essential businesses would be closed and also suspended all international travel in civil aviation [8]. These policy restrictions, introduced to stop the spread of COVID-19, have had a serious impact on the lives of migrants.

Usually, most Central Asian migrant workers come to Russia between March and May and return to their country between late autumn and early winter before the New Year's Eve. But losing jobs and falling demand for labor in these months have led to large numbers of migrant workers returning to their countries. The loss of employment and coronavirus epidemic were the main push factors out of Russia. The number of migrants who left Russia in March were two and a half times more than those who returned in January, and three times more than those who returned in April [21].

It has been reported that hundreds of Central Asian citizens got stuck at the airports of Moscow, Novosibirsk, Ufa, Krasnodar and Yekaterinburg, prior to the full closure of those airports [22]. Zhukovsky Airport is the furthest airport of Moscow, there are no air express trains, and taxis from Moscow cost 1500 rubles. About 85 per cent of flights at the airport were cancelled due to the epidemic, with 92 per cent of passengers unable to leave. Regular flights to and from Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan were stopped at 12.00 PM on 20 March. This was the decision of governments of Central Asian states to prevent the spread of coronavirus [23]. 200 Central Asian migrants were stranded at Moscow's Domodedovo airport for two weeks, while 300 Kyrgyz citizens who were forced to stay at Novosibirsk airport went on hunger strike. After being stranded

at the airports for two weeks waiting to return, it has been relaxed for citizens of the Commonwealth of Independent States (CIS) [24].

Hundreds of people trying to get home to Uzbekistan, Tajikistan or Kyrgyzstan by car were also stranded at the border. Between early May and September 2020, because of the closure of state borders that have followed the COVID-19 pandemic, many Central Asian migrant workers who could not get home began to gather at the Russian-Kazakh border to reach their homeland [25]. They expected to transit through Kazakhstan. But they couldn't. The border was closed. Along the border there were spontaneous tent camps for several hundred people. There were men, women, children, elderly. Someone settled in cars or buses, someone in the open air in huts made of branches and polyethylene.

The first camp of migrants appeared in the Mashtakovo area (Orenburg region), a car checkpoint on the Russian-Kazakh border. According to rapidly growing rumors, it was from here that transit through closed Kazakhstan could reach Uzbekistan. And citizens with Uzbek passports reached out to Mashtakovo from all over Russia. Most of the migrants stranded at the border between Russia and Kazakhstan were men. But there were also children and pregnant women who did not want to leave their spouses and spent the night with them in temporary accommodation.

In May, about 800 Uzbek citizens were stranded in the Bolshechernigovsky district, demanding the opening of a transit corridor. Then they were placed in an Observatory camp and then sent home on special buses through Kazakhstan [25].

In June, 367 citizens of Uzbekistan left the territory of Samara oblast, crossing the border at the checkpoint Mashtakovo with Kazakhstan for departure to their homeland [26].

The district administrations, on the territory of which the camps were established, periodically organized food aid and the distribution of dry rations, the supply of drinking water. Huge assistance was provided by the local residents of the nearest settlements. However, according to media reports, there were no medical facilities in the camps, but in the neighborhood there was a cordon of border guards, employees of the Ministry of Internal Affairs and National Guard of the Russia (Rosgvardia), who were responsible for security in the camps [27].

Bus transit corridors were organized several times until mid-summer, but the flow of people to the borders continued. The situation worsened at the beginning of July, when an outbreak of coronavirus disease was officially reported in Kazakhstan and additional quarantine restrictions were imposed owing to the epidemiological situation. The capacity of border crossing points has plummeted, causing even more congestion at the border.

It has been reported that in August some 3,000 Kyrgyz citizens and more than 500 Uzbek citizens congregated on the Russian-Kazakh border. Previously, more than 2,700 Uzbek citizens had been returned home by train, but the recurrent organizational and administrative difficulties had adversely affected the capacity of border posts, creating new crowds [28].

A similar situation occurred at the Kazakh-Uzbek border. On July 3, about

2,000 of Tajik and Uzbek migrant workers, including women, children and the elderly were trapped at the Kazakh–Uzbek border without access to Uzbekistan. All migrants, including Uzbek migrants, had to complete 14-day quarantine upon arrival Uzbekistan [29], which closed the border in March due to the spread of coronavirus [30]. They manage to get to their homeland only as places in the quarantine zone become available.

Migrants without work and homeland

Russia's ban on international flights and rail services in mid-March, combined with similar measures taken at the home of migrant workers, left hundreds of thousands of million registered and unregistered migrants without a livelihood. According to the monitoring of the economic situation by the Center for Regional Studies of the RANEP, 54% of hired migrant workers lost their jobs or were sent on unpaid leave. All sources of income lost 32% of migrants against 17% of the Russians participating in the study [31]. IOM reports that after Russia announced lockdown, about 10,000 Kyrgyz migrants lost their works [22]. The main problems faced by Central Asian migrants are the inability to pay for rent (64%), to find work (45%), and to pay for food (43%) [32].

However, the employment processes of migrants in the regions and in the metropolitan area are quite different. In Moscow, the most severe self-isolation regime was established while in other regions the quarantine took place in a light form. When large cities like Moscow were closed down due to the COVID-19 pandemic, a digital pass system was

introduced so that people went out as little as possible [33]. Migrant workers faced considerable difficulties in obtaining these digital passes, as they had to have an officially registered job to do so. This meant that undocumented migrants were unable to leave their homes, which made access to social and health services very difficult [34].

As a result, the collapse of the migrant labour market in mega-cities was more pronounced than in the regions. According to the survey of the Institute of Sociology (branch of the Federal Center of Theoretical and Applied Sociology of the Russian Academy of Sciences), employment in Moscow began to decline in March, while the regions continued the traditional increase in migrant employment for that time of the year. While in the metropolitan area the number of respondents in April fell by 40.8% compared to March, in the regions by only 21.2% [21].

Conclusion

This study has attempted to examine policy responses have adopted in Russia and Central Asian countries to better understand how these measures affected mobilities and immobilities of Central Asian migrant workers. In a bid to contain the pandemic both Russia and Central Asian countries have launched to implement strict containment measures by closing their borders, declaring a state of emergency, and so on. Restrictions on population mobility have exposed many people on the move to significant risks, losing their jobs and incomes. It is critical when it comes to the mobilities of Central Asian migrant workers. Measures have affected mobilities of migrants in

various ways. Due to mobility restrictions thousands of migrants in Russia and Central Asia have forcibly returned, stranded at the borders, and denied assistance.

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