

## SITUATIONAL BRIEF: COVID-19 AND ASSOCIATED RISKS FOR CENTRAL ASIAN TEMPORARY LABOUR MIGRANTS IN THE RUSSIAN FEDERATION

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### CONTEXT OF TEMPORARY LABOUR MIGRANTS FROM CENTRAL ASIA IN RUSSIA

The Russian Federation continues to be a major destination country for Central Asian labour migrants<sup>1</sup>. There were nearly 5 million Central Asians living in the Russian Federation in 2019<sup>2</sup>, mainly coming from Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, and Uzbekistan in order to seek employment opportunities. Men continue to make up the majority of Central Asian migrants in Russia, but the number of women is increasing<sup>3</sup>. The Moscow metropolitan area attracts the largest number of Central Asian migrants, but their destinations also include other large cities across Russia<sup>4</sup>. Central Asian labour migrants are a largely vulnerable population in Russia, with some of the major difficulties including precarious legal status, economic vulnerabilities, ethnic and racial discrimination, and inaccessible healthcare services. Russia's immigration laws are complex and subject to frequent changes<sup>5,6</sup>. Bureaucracy and high costs explain why many (estimated to be up to 2/3) Central Asian migrants have irregular legal status (e.g., lacking residential registration and/or work permit) and therefore are often more marginalized and exploited by their employers and law enforcement officials<sup>7</sup>. Legal precarity and discrimination affect migrants' daily lives and hinder their access to resources including health care<sup>8,9</sup>. Central Asians are prone to ethnoracially-based harassment<sup>10,11</sup>. Limited Russian language proficiency can add to migrants' economic and legal marginalization<sup>12</sup> and serve as a barrier to healthcare service utilization<sup>13</sup>. Social exclusion and discrimination constrain some Central Asian migrants' employment opportunities and they may then settle for low-skilled service positions and jobs in construction and transportation<sup>14,15</sup>. Limited access to healthcare is one of the major structural barriers that Central Asian labour migrants face in Russia. Labour migrants, as opposed to citizens and permanent residents, in Russia are not eligible for state-sponsored compulsory insurance, OMS (Obyazatelnoye Meditsinskoye Strakhovaniye). Without the state-sponsored OMS, the health care choices of Central Asian labour migrants are limited to emergency care, paid services at state clinics as well as informal payments to doctors, and expensive private healthcare facilities<sup>16</sup>. Lack of insurance and high costs relative to income are barriers to getting adequate health care for Central Asian labour migrants, which raises concerns for how this population will be affected by the COVID-19 epidemic in Russia.

### RISKS FOR CENTRAL ASIAN LABOUR MIGRANTS IN RUSSIA DURING THE COVID-19 PANDEMIC

Russia currently has the third highest number of COVID-19 cases in the world, after the United States and Brazil<sup>17</sup>. There are over 560,000 official cases of COVID-19 in the Russian Federation to date and more than 7,600 deaths<sup>18</sup>. The majority of the cases are in Moscow, but there are documented cases across the country<sup>19</sup>. The Russian government has an official website dedicated to COVID-19 with extensive information about opportunities for testing, information about free medical care for COVID-19 patients, prevention measures, information for Russian citizens stranded abroad, stimulus payments for medical care workers, and social policy measures such as financial support for small businesses, pensioners, and families with children<sup>20</sup>. There is no official systematic collection of data available on COVID-19 infections or mortality specifically among migrants. Based on the aforementioned legal, economic, and social vulnerabilities experienced by Central Asian labour migrants in Russia, we

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should assume that their risks for COVID-19 are as high, if not higher, than among Russian citizens. In fact, several outbreaks amongst this migrant population have been reported in the popular press<sup>21</sup>. Most alarming in regard to risk for infection of and complications from COVID-19 is that Central Asian labour migrants experience major institutional barriers, including discrimination to getting tested for the virus and to medical care to manage the symptoms<sup>22</sup>.

- On 31 January 2020, the Russian government added COVID-19 to the list of ‘dangerous diseases’ for which a positive diagnosis is cause for deportation of foreigners<sup>23</sup>. Since this contentious pre-existing policy violate migrants’ rights and has served as a barrier for HIV testing we therefore assume that the policy will have negative implications for Central Asian migrants’ access to testing and medical care for COVID-19, and could lead to fear of reporting suspected cases.
- Lack of medical insurance is another major concern in Central Asian labour migrants’ COVID-19 risk. OMS (the obligatory medical insurance policy) would cover the costs of a test and hospitalization for COVID-19 patients, yet citizens of Tajikistan and Uzbekistan are not eligible for OMS. Since 2017, citizens of the Eurasian Union countries (which include Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan) are eligible for OMS when residing in Russia; however, many labour migrants have not obtained this insurance for various reasons, including lack of awareness of the updated policy and difficulties in navigating Russian bureaucracy<sup>24</sup>.
- Existing research has shown that the cost of medical diagnostic and treatment services is one of the most significant barriers for Central Asian labour migrants’ utilization of health services while in Russia<sup>25</sup>. Paying for a COVID-19 test is likely not an option for many labour migrants, and the costs associated with extended hospitalization are even more concerning.

The economic hardships due to the COVID-19 pandemic, and the now extensive period of society’s lockdown, have hit Russia hard, and Central Asian labour migrants – already in very precarious financial situations, for instance living pay cheque to pay cheque and sending a significant portion of their salaries back home – are particularly vulnerable.

- In March, Russia’s prime minister ordered the closing of all restaurants and catering facilities, except for delivery and takeout<sup>26</sup>, affecting large numbers of Central Asian labour migrants, who work in the food service sector.
- Furthermore, since Central Asian labour migrants, in particular in service jobs, are subject to poor work conditions and treatment from their employers<sup>27</sup>, those who continue to work will likely have no protection from, and therefore increased exposure to, the virus<sup>28</sup>.
- For the many labour migrants that are now without work, basic survival is at stake; food and housing insecurity have been widely reported, with some reports of evictions as they could not pay rent<sup>29,30</sup>. There have been reports of Central Asian labour migrants who have committed suicide because of the desperate situation they have found themselves in<sup>31</sup>.
- Overcrowded and poor sanitation and housing conditions are likely to exacerbate the risk of infection for Central Asian labour migrants<sup>32,33,34</sup> and people have been unable to effectively quarantine if they have fallen ill with COVID-19 symptoms<sup>35</sup>.
- Unfortunately, there have been media reports of Central Asians stealing food or robbing people<sup>36</sup>. It will be important to monitor the situation so that these types of reports do not fuel the xenophobia and discrimination that is common in Russia.
- The World Bank projects grave consequences for global remittances because of the pandemic: Europe and Central Asia will be hardest hit and Central Asian countries dependent on these remittances should expect to see a 28% decrease in remittances in 2020<sup>37</sup>. The COVID-19 pandemic will have long lasting impact not only on the Central Asians working in Russia, but also on their family members back home who rely on these remittances.

Another significant concern is how measures to stop population movement and border control have resulted in the poor treatment of Central Asian labour migrants and placing them at increased risk from COVID-19. When Russia and Central Asian countries announced external borders closures, hundreds of Central Asian migrants trying to return to their home countries were stuck in transit zones at airports and in transit cities<sup>38,39,40</sup> with many left to sleep on the floor in crowded areas and with little

access to food<sup>41</sup>. Additionally, there are Central Asians (and other foreigners) who are now facing indefinite detention in temporary detainment centers for foreigners<sup>42</sup>.

## RESPONSE TO COVID-19 AND CENTRAL ASIAN LABOUR MIGRANTS IN RUSSIA

- On April 18 2020, President Putin signed an executive order<sup>43</sup>, which automatically extended the legal length of stay in the country for all foreigners in Russia up to 15<sup>th</sup> June, extending the validity of migration documents and removing work permit requirements, including the cost for these work permits between 15<sup>th</sup> March and 15<sup>th</sup> June. This executive order also included the suspension of deportations and court hearings on the breaches of immigration laws during this period. On June 15 2020, this executive order was updated to extend the date to 15<sup>th</sup> September<sup>44</sup>.
  - The Russian border remains effectively closed and even transportation options out are almost nonexistent. Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan and Uzbekistan closed their borders in March and all three countries tried to organize some charter flights for their citizens<sup>45, 46, 47, 48</sup>. However, there are still many migrants stranded and waiting for transportation home<sup>49, 50</sup> with tens of thousands of Central Asian migrants declaring that they want to return home and even attempting to relocate to Russian cities that border Kazakhstan with hopes of passing through land borders<sup>51</sup>. The consulates in Russia have opened hotlines for their citizens and Kyrgyzstan and Uzbekistan have committed to providing financial aid to citizens in need<sup>52</sup>. For example, the Uzbekistan Embassy in Moscow will provide 12,130 rubles to migrants with disabilities, pregnant women and women with small children, students, and individuals with COVID-19<sup>53</sup>.
- Civil society organizations with already limited funds have tried to respond to the immediate needs of Central Asian labour migrants stranded in Russia without jobs and resources. This includes organizations operating within Russia, such as Civic Assistance and Sakhovat<sup>54</sup>; as well as Central Asian diaspora communities with online fundraising campaigns.
- The mayor of Moscow has stated that migrants should have access to testing and medical care<sup>55</sup>.
- There are a lack of data on number of infections and access to medical treatment. While there have been some important policy-level responses, there is overall a lack of adequate response to protecting Central Asian labour migrants from COVID-19 and the economic vulnerabilities associated with the pandemic.

## RECOMMENDATIONS TO ADDRESS COVID-19 RISK AND RESPONSE AMONG CENTRAL ASIAN LABOUR MIGRANTS IN RUSSIA

Following the Lancet Migration Global Call to Action<sup>56</sup>, we propose several recommendations to ensure a COVID-19 response that is inclusive of Central Asian labour migrants in Russia:

R1. There is an immediate need to ensure **access to free COVID-19 testing and treatment to all labour migrants**, irrespective of their OMS insurance status. This information needs to then be effectively communicated to the migrant populations.

R2. Central Asian countries should coordinate with the Russian government to facilitate the **urgent repatriation of their citizens who want to return home from Russia**. This must be done immediately in order to limit the possible spread of the virus from Russia, and Central Asian countries and necessary measures should be implemented to ensure that those returning quarantine themselves upon arrival.

R3. Central Asian countries should coordinate with Russia to provide **financial support to citizens stranded abroad, and Russia must also commit to providing basic necessities**, such as food, water, housing, and healthcare, to labour migrants who are experiencing heightened vulnerabilities due to the COVID-19 pandemic.

R4. Migrants who are awaiting departure should be **provided with food, water and safe and dignified accommodation** that does not place them at heightened risk for COVID-19 infection until they can safely return to their home country.

R5. It is critical that Central Asian labour migrants are **included in the Russian government's COVID19 prevention, testing and treatment strategies**. For example, the Russian government should ensure that public health information relating to COVID-19 is translated into all necessary languages and is culturally sensitive and accessible for Central Asians.

R6. The Russian government should continue to **extend the expiration dates of visa registrations and work permits for foreign citizens** until the pandemic is fully under control and travel is safe for everyone. After the expiration date there should be time for labour migrants to have financial and time resources to re-establish the validity of their work permits. This information must be effectively communicated to labour migrants to ensure that they are aware of their rights and to mitigate the chances that they will be exploited.

R7. The Russian government must immediately begin to **collect data on COVID-19 incidence, hospitalizations, mortality rates, and recovery rates among Central Asian labour migrants** in Russia and guarantee that this information will be used solely for public health purposes.

R8. Efforts must be made to **prevent stigmatisation, discrimination and xenophobia of migrants**, and actively counter the narrative that portrays Central Asian migrants as spreading the virus, which is likely to lead to further discrimination and stigmatisation and prevent reporting of COVID19 cases amongst migrant communities. Cases of xenophobia and discrimination must be documented and addressed by the relevant authorities.

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