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POLITICS IN THE TAJIK EMIGRANT COMMUNITY COMPLEX

Karolina Kluczewska & Oleg Korneev

Post-doctoral Research Fellow (GLOBALCONTEST), CERAL, University of Paris 13, Paris (France); Associate Research Fellow, Laboratory for Social Anthropological Research, Tomsk State University, Tomsk (Russia); karolinainwork@gmail.com

Principal Investigator (GLOBALCONTEST), Research Fellow (CERAL), University of Paris 13, Paris (France); Associate Leading Research Fellow, Laboratory for Social Anthropological Research, Tomsk State University, Tomsk (Russia); oleg.vl.korneev@gmail.com; oleg.vl.korneev@gmail.com

ABSTRACT – This article traces the different origins, development, agency and political stances of various Tajik emigrant communities that emerged after the break-up of the Soviet Union, mainly in Russia, but also beyond the post-Soviet space. It argues that factors such as time and type of arrival, region of origin, socio-economic status in the host society, host and home country policies, all impact on interactions within and across these emigrant populations, as well as on their engagement with the homeland. The article critically examines manifestations of socio-political activism within the Tajik emigrant community complex and points at different forms and degrees of mobilization. It also shows the complexity of answers to emigrants’ activities by the Tajik government, based on a “perceived utility” of different emigrant communities.

KEY WORDS – Tajikistan, Russia, diaspora, migrants, labour migration, migration policy
INTRODUCTION

In this article, we explore politics in Tajik emigration, principally in Russia, where the bulk of Tajiks living outside Tajikistan are based, although we shall consider parts of the diaspora living elsewhere as well. Our key interest is in how politics in Tajik emigration interlocks with an evolving set of policies that the Tajik state has come to adopt towards specific emigrant categories and communities. Our approach draws on the seminal work of Hirschman (1978), as well as more recent political science literature on diaspora formation in international relations and migration studies (Betts & Jones, 2012; Byford, 2012; Caglar, 2004; Gamlen, 2014; Hirt, 2015; Koinova, 2012; Ragazzi, 2009; Tinguy de, 2010).

The politics that we focus on is that which concerns the relationship between the “diaspora” and the “homeland”, although we will also touch on some of the interactions between different parts of the “diaspora”. The choice of the angle which we adopt stems from our reflection on the limitations of the literature on international migration. While research on diaspora groups focuses on politics within these groups and rarely pays attention to the home country, research on states’ migration policies assumes that states have one single policy towards emigrants. As a result, what we are interested in, both

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INTRODUCTION

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theoretically and empirically, is not just the emigrants’ own political stances and activities, but also the political functions that Tajiks living abroad have come to serve for the Tajik state, which results in a multi-tier policy towards these emigrant groups. By policies we mean not only official documents outlining the approach of the government to the issue, but also attitudes and spontaneous actions. Here our analysis finds inspiration in the important observation by Tsourapas (2015) about the “perceived utility” of emigrant groups for their state of origin, which refers to the state’s calculation of benefits (and risks) of emigrant groups either remaining abroad or returning home. Tsourapas notes that (a) not all emigrants are equally “useful” to their state of origin, politically or otherwise; and (b) that states, as a consequence, develop multi-tiered policies towards their diaspora, targeting various emigrant categories differently, depending on their “utility”. We, however, refine his framework by showing that emigrant groups perceived as less important (either economically or politically) by their home states do not necessarily receive less attention (which may include different forms of engagement, such as support or control) from the government of their homeland.

Important to bear in mind here is that diasporas can serve a range of different functions and that these will depend on the character of the state in question. Gerschewski (2013) identifies three mutually reinforcing pillars of stability in authoritarian states: legitimation, repression and co-optation. In our analysis of the Tajik state’s relationship to the Tajik “diaspora” we use a particular adaptation of this framework that focuses on forms of trans-national legitimation, co-optation and repression. And as we shall show, different segments of the Tajik “diaspora” are being treated very differently by the Tajik state, depending on their political stance towards the Tajik government, the function they serve for the state, and, consequently, their perceived “utility”.

Ever since the end of the civil war in 1997, the Tajik state has been seeking to legitimize the current government among Tajiks abroad, not least by trying to engage with and co-opt as many diaspora organizations as possible into a “loyal” network. Tajik diplomatic structures have been engaging on

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2. This adaptation was put forward at the seminar “Authoritarian Governance of Overseas Citizens’ organized within the framework of the ERC-funded research project “Authoritarianism in a Global Age” (University of Amsterdam, 21–22 September 2015).
a regular basis with cultural organizations in the diaspora, framing them as international promoters of Tajik culture, while emphasizing their role as links between Tajiks abroad and the homeland (implicitly or explicitly embodied by the state). This has been the strategy even though such formal organizations in reality hardly represent or communicate with the vast majority of ordinary Tajiks in the diaspora (Varshaver & Rocheva, 2014).

Of still greater interest to the Tajik government have been successful Tajik entrepreneurs. They, above all others, are being enticed with tax breaks and other incentives to make financial investments through the state’s own development programmes. The Tajik state is being advised and assisted on this matter by international organizations (IOs) and this has certainly helped foster a greater degree of trust. Nevertheless, such initiatives are at a relatively early stage of development and the Tajik state still has some way to go to persuade Tajik émigré businessmen to invest in its programmes, rather than follow the more traditional route of donating directly to their villages of origin and relatives.

At the same time as building a “loyal diaspora”, the authorities are turning certain groups of Tajiks abroad into vilified “enemies of the state” (vatan-furush, hylonati millat in Tajik). In a situation when the space for political opposition is restricted in the country, several opposition groups formed abroad. Even though based outside the country, these groups claim to have become the targets of concerted, and (importantly) highly public cross-border repression, serving as examples of what might happen to those who oppose the state, both inside and outside the country. The political opposition to the state in emigration is rather fragmented and heterogeneous, and its scope for political action is, in practice, quite limited. Nevertheless, even relatively marginal oppositional groups are being targeted by the authorities with various instruments of transnational repression, which we describe in greater detail below. Importantly, transnational repression is not a form of mobilization, but a reaction against mobilization. Thus, unlike transnational legitimation and co-optation, transnational repression is not an active policy of the state towards these emigrant groups but rather a reactive one.

And finally, there are parts of the Tajik “diaspora”—especially the “newer” communities, which have formed in the last fifteen years through labour migration or migration for study purposes. The political function and the
“utility” of these groups to the Tajik state are as yet uncertain. The consequence of this is that the Tajik state’s engagement with them has been limited and that it is the formalized “diaspora” organizations that are taking over from the state the role of providing support for these groups.

As should be clear from the above, when using the word “diaspora”, we use quotation marks. In English, “diaspora” is generally used in the singular, which suggests a unified group. Russian uses the term “diasporas” (diaspory), which better grasps the heterogeneity of the concept. In our analysis, we follow Ragazzi’s (2009) argument that “diasporas” should not be considered unitary actors. To capture the heterogeneity, and to some degree the “messiness”, of the mobilization and social and political activism within the Tajik “diaspora”, we borrow the term “complex” from Betts and Jones (2012, pp. 8–9). We use this term to encompass the full range of organizations, social networks, political stances and activities, which can be nesting, overlapping or competing, in what is, in fact, a diverse plurality of Tajik emigrant communities. In other words, we conceptualize the Tajik “diaspora” as a complex of communities, which have formed separately in very different contexts of emigration and immigration. This is why we prefer to use the term “Tajik emigrant communities”, both for analytical purposes and because it better grasps the situation on the ground.

In this paper, we draw upon primary and secondary material in English, French, Russian and Tajik. Primary materials were collected in Tajikistan and Russia, and include interviews with Tajik officials involved in shaping the country’s migration policies, lawyers working with migrants, and employees of non-governmental organizations who work with emigrant communities. We complement interviews with ethnographic observations from our long-term fieldwork in Tajikistan and Russia. We also rely on websites, Youtube channels and other online information outlets used by various Tajik emigrant communities. Finally, we refer to articles related to emigrant communities, published in international, Tajik and Russian daily newspapers and news outlets (Asia Plus, BBC, Eurasianet, IWPR, RFE/RL, Radio Svoboda, Rossijskaâ Gazeta, Ruspres).

The paper proceeds as follows. In the first section, we outline the diversity of Tajik emigrant communities. Then we discuss the “old” emigrant communities which formed during the civil war and the various efforts of the
Tajik state to co-opt them since then. In the section that follows, we look at organized political opposition in emigration and at measures with which the Tajik state has responded to these groups. In the fourth and final section, we examine the positioning of the “new” migrant groups (the young transnational elites and the labour migrants) in-between the activities and agendas of the “old” emigrant communities, on the one hand, and the Tajik state, on the other. We conclude by summarizing the political contours of Tajik “diasporization” in interaction with Tajikistan’s policies towards the Tajik emigrant community complex. Overall, we show that the concept of “perceived utility” is fundamental to understanding the relationship between the Tajik authorities and Tajik populations living abroad. This relationship is multifaceted, but follows a discernible logic. At the same time, however, the lines of contestation and cooperation between the two are both blurred and changeable, which is the result of fluctuations in the relevant groups’ “perceived utility”.

THE TAJIK EMIGRANT COMMUNITY COMPLEX

The first wave of Tajik emigration—mainly, but not exclusively, to Russia—was the result of the breakup of the Soviet Union in 1991 and the Tajik civil war that lasted from 1992 to 1997. If we bracket out “Russian” minorities who had already left independent Tajikistan en masse by 1993, there were at least a further half million ethnic Tajiks who emigrated during the course of the 1990s. These were, for the most part, representatives of the political opposition, successful entrepreneurs, educated professionals, ethno-regional groups that found themselves on the losing side in the war, such as the Pamiris, and civil servants who were gradually removed from politics, such as the Khujandis (Akiner, 2001; HRW, 1996; Tadjbakhsh, 1995).

This emigrant category, which established itself during the 1990s, mostly in Moscow, we refer to as the “old” Tajik emigrant communities. This in itself is a far from unified group: it remains divided according to ethno-regional identities and allegiances, and it includes a diversity of ideological stances, political agendas, attitudes towards the regime in Tajikistan, and levels of socio-political activism. However, what the members of this group have in common is that they are by now well-established in emigration, usually hold dual Russian-Tajik citizenship, work as professionals or run successful businesses, and have no plans to return to Tajikistan permanently, even while
maintaining regular contact with their families and communities back home (Mukomel, 2015). All of this, together with the capital of time spent in emigration, has allowed members of this early emigrant wave to become the founders of the majority of the most visible community organizations, political groups, and ethnic enterprises within the Tajik diaspora. These “old” emigrant communities are also, for these same reasons, the ones demonstrating the highest levels of social, economic and political activism within the Tajik emigrant community complex (heterogeneous as this activism might be).

The 2000s–2010s have, however, seen a considerable expansion of the Tajik population living and working outside Tajikistan. This more recent growth of the Tajik emigrant community complex has been due to two much less permanent emigrant categories. First, there is the smaller group of young transnational elites—those whose emigration is motivated primarily by the pursuit of professional self-development and whose move abroad tends to include an initial period of study in a foreign country (traditionally, and still predominantly, at universities in Russia, but increasingly in the West as well). This category is so far showing only very modest tendencies towards mobilization for social or political causes, and this mostly as the result of their expanding social expectations following life abroad. However, as we shall see, certain forms of mobilization and activism do appear to be on the increase among this emigrant category.

Finally, the largest group of Tajik citizens currently living abroad (principally in Russia), are labour migrants. Numerous as they might be (1.5 million or one-sixth of the population of Tajikistan, by some estimates3), this is an economically dependent, often educationally disadvantaged, socially vulnerable, and politically voiceless group, which, as a result, remains highly susceptible to exploitation and discrimination in the host country. This group does not manifest tendencies to mobilize for political reasons regarding their

3. According to the latest available data from the Russian Ministry of Internal Affairs, in June 2017 there were 983,508 Tajik citizens registered in the Centralized Database of Foreign Nationals (CBDUIG, which functions as Russia’s “register of foreign nationals”). Of these 602,878 were registered for the first time. See: https://мвд.рф/Deljatelnost/statistics/migracionnaya/item/10735340/ (accessed 3 March 2018). However, there are, in fact, no reliable data on the number of Tajik citizens in Russia. This is in the first place because of a visa-free regime which allows Tajik citizens to enter and exit Russia freely, while there are an estimated 330,000 individuals with dual Tajik-Russian citizenship (Mukomel 2015, p. 7). Secondly, differences in estimates are also an outcome of different methodologies of collecting data by Tajik and Russian border guards and other state bodies.
home country. While members of this emigrant community rely principally on support from traditional family networks, which extend across borders, they on the whole lack the resources to organize themselves more formally in order to protect their interests. Consequently, labour migrants have come to depend on support provided by organizations and businesses set up and led by those from better-established and more educated emigrant groups from the “old” emigrant communities. This, however, tends to turn the mass of labour migrants into a “market” for migrant support services—in other words, a source of profit and potentially a target of exploitation, making the relationship between the “old” emigrant communities providing such services and the labour migrants ambivalent and potentially even divisive.

THE FORMATION OF THE “OLD” EMIGRANT COMMUNITIES AND THE EFFORTS OF THE TAJIK STATE TO CO-OPT THEM

The formation of the “old” Tajik emigrant communities was the outcome of the Tajik civil war in the 1990s. Tajikistan was the only country in Central Asia where the breakup of the USSR was followed by an outbreak of large-scale violence. Overall, one-sixth of the population of Tajikistan (almost 800,000 people) left the country during this period, fleeing mostly to Russia, but also to neighbouring Central Asian countries, as well as Afghanistan (HRW, 1996). This figure includes 320,000 Russians, Ukrainians, Poles, Jews and Germans—who were the first to exit (Tadjbakhsh, 1995, p. 19; Akiner, 2001, p. 34). As for the emigration of ethnic Tajiks themselves, this was directly shaped by the politics of the civil war.

The civil war in Tajikistan was a conflict between two blocs, formed mostly as ethno-regional alliances, often encompassing contradictory ideologies. The United Tajik Opposition (UTO) was dominated by Islamists from Gharm, but also included Pamiris who demanded a secular democratic state. The pro-government National Front was composed of the old, Soviet-era,

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4. We discuss the policies and practices of what we describe as Tajikistan’s ‘(non)involvement’ with the labour migrants in Kluczewska and Korneev (2015).

5. Tajikistan is divided along regional lines, which form the basis for sub-national identity. Major regional groups include Khujandis (Leninobadis) in the north, Kulobis in the south, Gharmis in the north-east and Pamiris in the east. Pamiris are also a separate ethno-linguistic and religious group, with strong ties to the transnational community of Ismailis, with the Aga Khan as their spiritual leader. Ethnic Uzbeks make up 15% of the population and live in the northern, western and south-western parts of the country, and to a large extent blend into the regional divisions.
Tajik elites from Leninabad, now Khujand, in the north of the country, and the Kulobis from the south. By 1993, the UTO was forced out of Tajikistan by pro-government and supporting Russian forces, and it established itself in exile. While its Islamist faction moved to Afghanistan, the national-democratic, Pamiri, faction emigrated to Moscow (Heathershaw, 2009, p. 30).

Meanwhile, within the pro-government bloc, there was growing discontent among the Khujandis. While in Soviet times this group dominated the governing structures, performing the highest state functions, they were now increasingly sidelined from decision-making by the Kulobis, whose dominance of the Provisional Government grew steadily. The monopolization of power by the southerners was cemented in the 1994 presidential elections, when the Kulobi leader Emomali Rahmon defeated the Khujandi Prime Minister Abdumalik Abdullojonov.

The outcome was that the Khujandis started to move abroad and operate increasingly from there, namely Moscow. They formed the so-called National Reconciliation Movement, led by Abdullojonov, who became Tajikistan’s ambassador to Russia (Tadjbakhsh, 1995, p. 7). However, after an assassination attempt on President Rahmon, which took place in Khujand in 1998, the Kulobi-led government cracked down on the Khujandis and excluded them from politics (Heathershaw, 2009, p. 35). Abdullojonov was accused of orchestrating the assassination plot and was forced to flee to the United States, where he was granted asylum (Parshin, 2013). The rest of the Khujandi elites moved to Russia. As shown by Mahmadbekov (2012, p. 80), this politically-motivated mass emigration of the Khujandis entailed also the outflow of highly qualified citizens, depleting some of Tajikistan’s key state sectors, especially those of education, health care and science, in which the better-educated groups from the north used to predominate.

The Tajik emigrant communities that formed in Russia—a country that was relatively easy to escape to from conflict-torn Tajikistan and that was also rather generous in terms of citizenship acquisition at that time (Geddes & Korneev, 2015; Ivakhnyuk, 2008)—were ethnically heterogeneous and divided along ethno-regional lines. This reflects the persistence of traditional ties of social solidarity, which remain strong across post-Soviet Central Asia (Collins, 2003; Ikhamov 2013, p. 188). Representatives of different regions within Tajikistan, namely the Khujandis, Pamiris, Gharmis, and others that
together form the “old” Tajik emigrant communities still tend to prioritize their own ethno-regional networks, often competing with each other, both in the trade and the professional and service sectors.

Overall, however, members of these “old” Tajik emigrant communities have in common an above-average level of education, and tend to fare well in the Russian job market thanks to their Soviet-era qualifications. Some have established themselves as successful businessmen involved in the shuttle trade between Russia and Tajikistan, importing fruit, vegetables and other goods between their home regions and larger cities in Russia (Olimova & Bosc, 2003, p. 24; ILO, 2010, p. 39). Others are working as doctors, lawyers, journalists and cultural producers. Their successful integration is probably the main reason why they show little inclination to return to their homeland, although they do stay in close touch with it through family and economic connections.

Between the late 1990s and the mid-2000s, the “old” Tajik emigrant communities were very active in setting up a number of officially registered associations in Russia, which served mostly as social and cultural centres. From very early on, almost as soon as the civil war had ended, the Tajik state saw their “perceived utility” and sought to engage these organizations. The idea, expressed already in 1998 in the so-called “Concept on Diaspora Engagement”, was that the Tajik state could, in fact, perform the role of “unifier” of an otherwise fragmented diasporic network, bringing together the various émigré communities and organizations by offering them a common framework for engagement with the homeland.

In some cases, the boundary between a particular diaspora organization and the Tajik state became rather blurry. For example, one of the Tajik diaspora organizations that was especially active in Russia during the early 2000s was Inson (Olimova & Bosc, 2003, p. 131). Inson was an émigré formation, but it was founded and led by Muzaffar Zaripov, who happened to be the representative of the Tajik government in Russia during the mid-1990s and whose explicit task at that time was to develop active ties with Tajik citizens abroad (Interview 1).

In practice, though, the efforts of the Tajik state to engage the “old” Tajik emigrant community became highly bureaucratic and were turned into a
complex process that required the involvement of a number of state agencies and ministries who often disagreed with each other, slowing down the implementation of the initiative (Interview 1). Things did not seem to improve much during the 2000s, even though the government’s ideas remained as ambitious as before. In 2007, a new action plan to engage with emigrant communities was confirmed, but its value proved to be mostly symbolic, since no state funds were allocated for it.⁶

Currently, a relatively small department in the Migration Service of the Ministry of Labour, Migration and Employment of the Republic of Tajikistan is responsible for maintaining ties with diaspora organizations officially registered in Russia. The Migration Service has made publicly available a list of Tajik organizations abroad that can be seen as forming a “loyal” (or at least politically neutral) network. The latest version, from 2013, contains information on 80 such organizations, all of which are officially registered in Russia.⁷ Most of them, around 80%, have direct links with the Tajik Embassy in Moscow. Their heads are registered in the Tajik Embassy as members of what has been dubbed the Public Council (Interview 2).

In most cases, however, the Tajik government does not possess detailed information on these organizations—their size, their activities, or even their precise location (Yarbabaeva, 2013, p. 91). Little information is available on the websites of these organizations concerning their political orientation, exact functions and sources of funding (e.g. whether they operate on a non-profit or commercial basis). Moreover, the heads of many of these organizations seem reluctant to engage with the wider public (including researchers who approach them for interviews, as evidenced in our own attempts to establish contacts with them).

Tajik diplomatic structures are, however, encouraged to work with such diaspora organizations, and they do so, on a regular basis, especially in staging joint cultural events. The president of Tajikistan, Emomali Rahmon, has

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6. IOs, such as IOM and UNDP, were very much behind this strategy development and were pushing for similar strategies in Kyrgyzstan around this same time. This was in line with the strategy of diaspora engagement that these and other IOs were promoting at various global forumson migration (Gamlen, 2014; Pécoud, 2015).

personally praised these organizations for doing the valuable work of promoting Tajik cultural values abroad, thereby construing them as key contributors to the Tajik state’s own cultural-diplomatic efforts (ILO, 2010, p. 72). This applies also to cultural-diplomatic activity in the West. For example, in September 2016, the Embassy of Tajikistan organized a seminar devoted to the 25th anniversary of Tajikistan’s independence, in partnership with both the School of Oriental and African Studies (SOAS), University of London, and the British-based Tajik cultural society Payvand.8

Rather more important than cultural diplomacy, though, has been the strategy of the Tajik government to incentivize wealthier members of the diaspora to invest in the home country, and to do this via the state’s own development programmes. This strategy builds on the well-established practice of Tajik émigrés supporting their communities back home. According to traditional Tajik social organization, even if a (male) member of a local community has been absent for a number of years, he does not stop participating in the latter’s social life (Cieślewska, 2015, p. 57). Those who are particularly successful are supposed to maintain not only their immediate families, but also the wider community. These expectations do not disappear with geographical distance or time.

In the last few years, the Tajik government—as advised by the World Bank and the International Organization for Migration (IOM)—has carried out an assessment of the financial potential of the “old” Tajik emigrant communities and has started to do more to encourage the latter to re-channel their traditional sense of obligation towards their communities into supporting some of the government’s own larger-scale development projects. Engagement of this kind is still at an early stage, but a number of programmes are in the pipeline after the adoption, in 2010, of “The Concept on Engaging Compatriots Abroad as Partners for Development of the Homeland”. In 2012, a number of tax benefits were included in Tajikistan’s Tax Code to facilitate direct investments by both foreign and Tajik entrepreneurs living abroad (IOM, 2014, p. 27).

In 2014, the IOM, together with the government of Tajikistan, organized the first diaspora forum in Dushanbe. The forum took place on a symbolic

date, the day before the 17th anniversary of the Day of National Unity (June 26th, 1997), which marks the end of the Tajik civil war (1992–1997). This forum was the first opportunity for successful Tajik businessmen based in Russia to network with representatives of various Tajik ministries. The profiles of the participants, as well as the patriotic tone of the collective declaration prepared by them (authors’ participant observation; IOM, 2014, p. 43), suggest that current power networks in Tajikistan can no longer be understood exclusively through the lens of ethno-regional allegiances. Indeed, in order to secure lucrative business in Tajikistan, successful émigré entrepreneurs from the northern regions were at this event pragmatically declaring their loyalty to a government dominated by the southern elites through patriotic statements and poems.

However, even though the government is clearly trying hard to incentivize Tajik emigrant communities to make their infrastructure investments and charitable donations via the state, in practice, the “old” emigrant communities still seem to prefer to bequeath money more directly to their own local communities (sometimes through low-level local authority structures, hukumat and jamoat). This is typical of donations intended for local school and hospital renovations or for the building of new roads in the more remote regions. The reason for this is that, firstly, there is still a preference among émigrés to support primarily their own extended families and communities of origin; and secondly, there is still widespread mistrust of the state administration, which is perceived as both disorganized and untrustworthy (Mukomel, 2015, p. 15).

The reluctance of Tajik emigrant communities to invest in state-run development programmes is amplified by the reciprocal mistrust of the Tajik authorities even towards perfectly loyal or at least neutrally positioned émigrés. Realizing the utility of this emigrant community, the Tajik government is interested in attracting financial resources from the wealthier parts of the diaspora, but only if there are no political strings attached (something not entirely atypical of state-diaspora relations in other parts of the world as well; cf. De Haas, 2010; Gamlen, 2014). In the case of Tajikistan, though, this amounts to a veritable attempt at “taxation without representation”. As we shall see in the following section, political ambitions that oppose the

9. This expression originates in the revolt against the Stamp Act of 1765, imposed by the British Empire in thirteen American colonies.
Tajik government, even when putting forward a moderate agenda, are discouraged.

**OPPOSITIONAL ACTIVISM IN EMIGRANT COMMUNITIES AND TRANSNATIONAL REPRESSION**

There are, indeed, sections of the Tajik emigrant community complex that are highly political and that embody, in fact, the principal open opposition to the Tajik regime. The Tajik opposition is not uniform, though: it is scattered across different countries and its representatives differ in their political motivations and agendas. What they all campaign for, however, is a change in governance—a more open and efficient political and economic system in Tajikistan. Their arguments are rarely about liberal democracy and individual freedoms, however. Rather, they emphasize the corruption, injustices and poor living standards suffered by the majority in the country.

Nonetheless, the oppositional activism of Tajiks abroad needs to be seen in the context of civil and political rights in Tajikistan. On the domestic political scene, there is little space for alternative voices. As argued by Lemon (2016a), ever since the end of the civil war, elections have been accompanied by the intimidation of opposition parties by the security services and the systematic undermining of their leaders’ reputation in the national media. Significantly, though, once oppositional politics moves, out of necessity, abroad, new instruments are deployed to silence vocal political activism in emigration. This has, in fact, become a common trend across Central Asia (Heathershaw & Cooley, 2017).

Traditionally, measures of “transnational repression” (adapted from Gerschewski, 2013), designed to suppress the opposition in exile, have included exercising diplomatic pressure on countries harbouring oppositional activists, calling for extraditions and carrying out the surveillance of politically active citizens even while they are living abroad. In our case study, the government of Tajikistan has developed a range of additional measures and legal action against the political activists’ families, friends and supporters still living in the country. Seen in this light, the “perceived utility” of reactive engagement with opposition groups abroad through “transnational repression” is the result of a calculation of risks for the government stemming from the existence and potential popularity of these groups.
The case of the Islamic Revival Party of Tajikistan (IRPT, *Hizbi Nahzati Islomii Tojikiston* in Tajik) offers a good illustration of the relations between the government and opposition more generally—both within Tajikistan itself and in emigration. The IRPT was founded in 1990, in the last stage of perestroika, and was present on the Tajik political scene during the civil war as the opposition to the National Front. The 1997 peace agreement, which ended the Tajik civil war, was a power-sharing arrangement: while the winning side, the National Front, dominated by the Kulobis, obtained 70% of seats in parliament, the united opposition, mainly the IRPT, received 30%. The IRPT was, in fact, the only formally registered religious party in Central Asia. Following a crackdown on religious activism in Tajikistan, the IRPT became the sole legally sanctioned framework of action for religious citizens. It was a moderate party, though, and confined itself to calling for the greater recognition of religion in public life, and not sharia. Moreover, it was careful to avoid criticizing the ruling People’s Democratic Party of Tajikistan.

Nevertheless, since the mid-2000s, the role of the IRPT in Tajik politics has been steadily declining. In the 2015 parliamentary elections, the IRPT lost its last two seats in parliament. Right after these elections, Muhiddin Kabiri, the party’s leader, left Tajikistan to settle in Germany, where he continues his political activity of raising awareness about the situation of opposition parties in Tajikistan and attempts to unite the opposition abroad. Meanwhile, the IRPT was declared a terrorist organization and accused of supporting the Islamic State (IS). The sentences handed down on sixteen leading members of the party amounted to over five decades of imprisonment in total. Since Germany refused to extradite Kabiri, the Tajik government started putting pressure on the leader’s inner circle still based in Tajikistan. Two lawyers who agreed to defend the arrested members of the IRPT, Buzurgmehr Yorov and Nuriddin Mahkamov, were themselves arrested on charges of bribery (*Asia Plus, 2015c*). The same happened to several of Kabiri’s family members, who were slandered in the state media. A number of allegedly spontaneous demonstrations took place in front of the Delegation of the European Union in Tajikistan, as well as several Western embassies, demanding the extradition of the “traitors of the motherland” (*Asia Plus, 2016a*). Kabiri refuses to return to Tajikistan, fearing an unfair trial. He claims that “[o]ur legal system, the judicial process in Tajikistan, is not based on the law. It operates by other rules.” (quoted in Trilling, 2015).
While the IRPT started off as an oppositional group based in Tajikistan and moved abroad, a number of other oppositional groups formed in emigration from the start. Most of these are based in Russia, although some of their members have had to flee to other countries, either within the former Soviet space (Belarus, Moldova) or beyond, to those countries where they managed to legalize their status (Germany, Spain, Turkey). It is difficult to estimate the size of these groups since, with the exception of their visible leaders, they remain low-profile. However, we estimate that they comprise no more than a few dozen active members each. The most active and vocal Tajik émigré oppositional organization is Group 24 (Gruppa 24), founded in Russia in 2012 by the fierce critic of the Tajik political establishment, Umarali Kuvvatov. The aim of Group 24 is nothing less than the overthrow of the current Tajik government. Kuvvatov was a successful businessman who used to be in partnership with members of the family of President Rahmon himself. However, their business relationship became acrimonious and following a dispute in 2012, Kuvvatov fled Tajikistan and has since been living between Turkey and Russia. Sympathizers of Group 24 include a number of other notable Tajik émigrés residing in various countries, such as Sharofiddin Gadoev, a Tajik entrepreneur who resides in Spain, and Russia-based Bakhtior Sattori, a former employee of the Tajik embassy and the Tajik Migration Service in Moscow, who was dismissed in 2012 when he started criticizing the Tajik government.

Group 24 mostly seeks to mobilize the support of Tajik citizens abroad in order to create a counter-force to the Tajik government, especially through its internet-based radio called Zello and various forms of social media. The ultimate aim of their activities is to achieve political change in Tajikistan, rather than to mobilize Tajik populations abroad. For example, in 2014, the organization tried to incite, from abroad, a mass political rally in Dushanbe. In response, the Tajik government sent security forces from the entire country to the capital to maintain order. One week before the alleged rally, internet connection was shut down in Soghd and the Rasht valley (where the opposition was based during the civil war) and the day of the rally text messages were disactivated throughout the whole country. No demonstrators appeared at the rally in the end (authors’ participant observation). However, following the incident, the government of Tajikistan declared Group 24 an extremist organization. Tajikistan’s Minister of the Interior, Ramazan
Rahimzoda, called its members “criminals living abroad, who are wanted in Tajikistan for various crimes” (quoted in RFE/RL, 2014).

Influential members of Group 24 who were still based in Tajikistan were imprisoned, while the Tajik government requested the extradition of its members based abroad. The activists’ family members claimed to have been interrogated and pressured to influence their relatives to return to Tajikistan (HRW, 2015). In 2012, Bakhtiyor Sattori was stabbed in front of his house in Moscow. He survived the assault and while in hospital gave an interview to the BBC in which he said that he was being followed for some time before the incident: “I could often see that close to my house [in Moscow] there were some suspicious individuals” (BBC, 2013, our translation). In 2015, Shabnam Khudoydodova, another active member of Group 24, was detained on extremism charges at the Russian-Belarusian border. She had been trying to cross the border to apply for asylum, having been tipped off that she might be kidnapped and forced to return to Tajikistan (HRW, 2015). Khudoydodova spent eight months in custody in Belarus, but was eventually released under pressure from the European Union and the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR). Similarly, in 2015, Sobir Valiev, the deputy head of Group 24, was detained in Moldova on extremism charges at the request of the Tajik authorities (HRW, 2015). Finally, in 2015, the group’s founder and leader, Kuvvatov, was shot dead in the central district of Istanbul.

Another Tajik oppositional group is the Moscow-based Vatandor [Patriot]. It was founded by the journalist Dodojon Atovulloev, who left Tajikistan in 1992, when his newspaper was accused of promoting inter-ethnic and religious hatred. In Russia, Atovulloev founded the oppositional newspaper Charoghi Ruz [Daylight], which has made a name for itself by its harsh, sardonic criticism of the Tajik establishment. In 2007, Atovulloev set up Vatandor with the aim of overthrowing the government in Tajikistan. In Atovulloev’s words:

“Today Tajikistan is on the verge of a catastrophe. In the country there is mass poverty, mass unemployment, and slowly Tajikistan is turning into a second Afghanistan. This is why our main goal
is to force Rahmon to leave voluntarily, and then organize free, democratic elections.”

Atovulloev’s ambition has been to mobilize both the “old” emigrant communities and labour migrants, mostly by using social media propaganda.11

Although Vatandor remains a marginal group that has very limited support among Tajiks abroad, the Tajik authorities’ reaction to it has been no different to the one they adopted towards Group 24. Since the early 2000s, Tajikistan has been repeatedly asking Russia for Atovulloev’s extradition, accusing him of defaming the Tajik president and of seeking to overthrow the legitimate government of Tajikistan. In 2011, in response to one of the extradition requests, Atovulloev was, in fact, detained by the Russian authorities, but was released relatively quickly thanks to pressure from international human rights groups (Camm, 2012). After this incident, Atovulloev left Russia and moved to Germany where he has been granted asylum (OSCE, 2001). In 2012, he was stabbed while dining in a restaurant in Moscow, but managed to survive this attack (Parshin, 2013).

Finally, even individuals and groups that are much more moderate than Group 24 or Vatandor can face repercussions if they start voicing political ambitions and oppositional ideas. A good example is the infamous case of the Tajik businessman, Zaid Saidov. Saidov left Tajikistan in the early 1990s. During the 1990s he made a fortune in Russia’s industrial sector. In 1999, he was invited by the Tajik government to return to Tajikistan to share his business experience and expertise. He was soon appointed Minister for Industry (2002–2007) and later served as Director of the Tajik Association of Businessmen (2007–2013).

In 2013, however, Saidov declared that he was founding a political party, which he dubbed New Tajikistan. Saidov argued that his party was not oppositional in character, but was there to serve as a hub of technocratic expertise,
which he believed the Tajik political scene was badly missing. That said, he publicly criticized the status quo in Tajikistan:

“We [the Tajik people] are on the verge of an abyss, and there is nowhere we can go from here. [...] We [members of the New Tajikistan party] do not want to accept this shameful socio-economic situation that the majority lives in.”

(Asia Plus, 2015b; republished interview; translation ours.)

In 2015, Saidov was detained and charged with fraud, bribery, rape and polygamy, and then sentenced to 51 years in prison (Asia Plus, 2015a). As in the case of Kabiri, the two lawyers who defended him were themselves arrested: Fahriddin Zokirov was accused of fraud, and Shuhrat Kudratov was jailed for nine years on the charge of bribing judges (Lemon, 2016a). These cases can be interpreted as veritable show trials, designed to send a message to other potential opposition leaders: repercussions for political activity will be extended to families, friends, supporters and business partners.

Such practices of the government’s engagement with opposition groups abroad through “transnational repression” show that “perceived utility” concerns not only tangible benefits of potential engagement through e.g. investment, like in the case of “old” emigrant communities. Reactive engagement by silencing and delegitimizing opposition groups by default reinforces the government’s legitimacy. While the Tajik government has a clear view and strategies towards both “old” emigrant communities and opposition groups abroad, its stance on young transnational elites and labour migrants is more blurry, as the next section will show.

THE AMBITIOUS POLITICAL “UTILITY” OF THE YOUNG TRANSNATIONAL ELITES AND LABOUR MIGRANTS

A relatively small, but growing, category of Tajiks in emigration are young people from the more educated and prosperous strata, who are migrating principally for university study and further professional development. Russia continues to be the most common destination for Tajik émigré students, continuing the trend that goes back to vocational exchanges from

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12. In the academic year 2013–14, the Russian Ministry of Education and Science allocated...
Soviet times (Olimova & Bosc, 2003, p. 11; Mahmadbekov, 2012, p. 88). However, increasing numbers of young Tajiks are also travelling to Europe and the United States, thanks especially to privately managed exchange programmes, such as “Work and Travel”, which operated between 2007 and 2011 (Interview 3).

Members of this emigrant category are, for the most part, not politically active. They demonstrate modest, and often only latent, tendencies towards mobilization for social or political causes. Nonetheless, those who return to Tajikistan after obtaining higher qualifications abroad are more likely to become dissatisfied with the status quo, something that the Tajik authorities seem to be wary of. Anecdotal evidence suggests that those who have studied in the West, in particular, are viewed with suspicion: their exposure to Western culture, values and governance seems to make it more difficult for them to be admitted to posts in the state administration. Despite that, the Tajik government does not seem to have assessed for itself the political (or other) “utility” of this relatively new emigrant community oriented towards the West. The Tajik authorities, however, have already assessed the “utility” of another student emigrant community—those who travel to Egypt, Saudi Arabia, Pakistan and Iran in pursuit of a religious education. Although the profile of students returning from such programmes does not correspond to religious militants, the state fears that these individuals could start reviving the suppressed religious-based challenge to existing power structures (Abramson, 2010, pp. 8–9). As put by the president of Tajikistan, Emomali Rahmon:

“Unfortunately, in most cases, young people who are left without control are not studying to become mullahs, but are taking a route to terrorism and religious extremism. They must all be brought back, otherwise they’ll become traitors.”

(IWPR, 2010).

In 2010, such students were ordered to return home.

1,133 places for Tajik students, in 2014-2015, 800, and in 2015–2016, 3,180. See the Facebook page of the Russian Embassy in Tajikistan: https://www.facebook.com/russianembassyintajikistan/posts/590170724476373:0 (accessed 3 March 2018). In total, about 20,000 Tajik students are studying at Russian universities (Sputnik, 2018).
The young transnational elites do, however, form organizations abroad, which pursue a variety of socio-political agendas and purposes. These include both organizations that focus on socio-economic activism and development programmes, while avoiding open politics, and those that are highly political and openly critical of the government. The key example of the former would be Peshraft [Progress in Tajik], a voluntary association set up by a group of Tajiks who used to study in the United Kingdom. Peshraft focuses on work with young people and on promoting education in Tajikistan, seeing this as the key means of ensuring the country’s sustainable development.\textsuperscript{13} Peshraft also operates a charitable foundation, called Tajikinvest, which is registered in the UK. Tajikinvest carries out fundraising to support orphanages in Tajikistan and to fund scholarships enabling talented young people from disadvantaged families in rural areas to study at university (Yarbabaeva, 2013, p. 94). Tajikinvest has been very successful so far, launching an unprecedented level of fundraising, involving, significantly, private partners from Tajikistan itself (most notably the Tajik airline company Somonair), rather than foreign donors.

A very different organization of young Tajiks abroad is Tajikistan’s Youth for the Revival of Tajikistan, a group founded by Makhсуд Ibragimov, who has been living in Russia since the mid-2000s. Tajikistan’s Youth for Revival is allied to other parts of the émigré opposition, such as Group 24, and its objective is the resignation of President Rahmon and the fall of the government in Tajikistan. Its campaign includes organizing protests against the Tajik government in Russian cities, including Moscow, Yekaterinburg, Saratov and Samara (Radio Ozodi/RFE/RL, 2016). The main means of campaigning is through the use of social media, which is becoming a key tool of oppositional mobilization in emigration.

The Tajik authorities have no means of reacting to such mass mobilization abroad, but they approach the organization’s leadership in exactly the same way as they do with all other oppositional groups. Ibragimov claimed to have been receiving threatening phone calls throughout 2014 and his relatives in Tajikistan were regularly interrogated by the security forces (BBC, 2014). That same year he was detained in Moscow following an extradition request from the Tajik government, but was soon released. Later that year, he was

\textsuperscript{13} See the website of Peshraft: http://www.peshraft.tj/ (accessed 3 March 2018).
stabbed in Moscow by an unidentified assailant. In 2015, he said that he had been detained by Moscow police and brought to a police station. As soon as he was released, he was kidnapped on the street and forced to embark on a plane to Dushanbe. After landing, he was arrested by the country’s authorities. While in prison, Ibragimov claimed to have been tortured and forced to make a press statement that his return to Tajikistan was voluntary (HRW, 2015).

Other members of Tajikistan’s Youth for Revival, Mehrubon Sattorov and Sohibnazar Abdunazarov, were similarly detained by Russian authorities in 2015 at the request of the Tajik government and were kept in custody for as long as twelve months. As soon as they were released they were detained again by the Russian Federal Migration Service, this time as irregular migrants. Abdunazarov managed to escape from the migration detention centre, while Sattorov remains in custody (Radio Ozodi/RFE/RL, 2016). The case of Tajikistan’s Youth for Revival suggests that the approach taken by the Tajik government towards opposition activists from these younger emigrant groups does not differ in the least from that adopted towards oppositional groups from the “old” emigrant communities. It also demonstrates that these activists are facing dual pressure—both from their homeland and from the host country. Not only are they, as migrants, struggling to maintain legal status in Russia, but also have to face the fact that Russian authorities collaborate closely with their Tajik counterparts.

Labour migrants offer, however, a very different case: their functions and roles seem to belong to an entirely different realm. While the “old” Tajik emigrant communities formed as a direct result of the civil war, mass labour emigration emerged as a consequence of the post-conflict deterioration in living conditions, due to the rapid increase in the country’s working population during the 2000s and the simultaneous decline in employment opportunities and low wages. Labour migrants are unquestionably the most numerous part of the Tajik emigrant community complex but they are also the least formally organized and the least politically vocal of the Tajik emigrant communities.

While it is beyond the scope of this article to discuss the political mobilization of labour emigrants themselves, relations between the “old” Tajik emigrant communities and labour emigrants are an important aspect of politics in Tajik emigration. The ties of social solidarity between the “old,”
elite-based, emigrant communities and the new wave of labour migrants, who as a rule come from rural areas, are mostly very weak. In the eyes of many emigrants from the previous generation, who now form a certain elite among Tajik emigrant communities, the labour migrants are damaging the reputation of Tajik citizens in Russia. Conversely, labour migrants often treat “old” diaspora organizations with mistrust—as we shall see, sometimes with good reason (Mukomel, 2015, p. 39). Mahmadbekov (2012, p. 52) observes that instead of seeking help from established emigrant communities, migrant labourers prefer to rely on their family and regional networks (what is known in Tajik as hamkishlok or hamshahri).

Because of this, despite the fact that the size of the labour migrant population outstrips all other emigrant communities in the diaspora, only a handful of the abovementioned 80 Tajik community organizations officially registered in Russia demonstrate explicit engagement with labour migrants. These are Fund Tajikistan, the Union of Tajikistanis in the Russian Federation, the Tajik Cultural Centre, and Tajik Labour Migrants. While some of them might have branches across Russia, they remain focused on Moscow and its suburbs, where most Tajik labour migrants work and live. What is politically distinctive about these organizations is that their focus is on criticizing Russian immigration policies and campaigning for the rights of Tajiks as labour migrants, while they systematically avoid making statements about the Tajik government or about politics back home.

Fund Tajikistan (Fond Tadžikistan in Russian) was set up in Moscow as early as 1996 by a well-known and respected Tajik female activist, Gavhar Juraeva, with financial support from the Soros Foundation. Initially, this organization was offering assistance to Tajiks displaced by the civil war. In the course of the 2000s, though, its focus shifted to providing information and legal help to labour migrants, as well as to recording cases of labour exploitation and monitoring xenophobic attacks (Radio Svoboda, 2009). Between 2002 and 2016, Juraeva’s organization provided consultations to over 100,000 individuals and filed over 12,000 legal cases of labour exploitation or discrimination (Rossijskaâ Gazeta, 2016). However, because of Russia’s restrictions on organizations receiving foreign funding in the recent years, Fund Tajikistan is currently on the verge of disappearing.
A very different organization was Tajik Labour Migrants (in Russian: *Tadžikskie trudovye migranty*). It was established in 2008 by Karomat Sharipov, a vocal defender of the rights of labour migrants, who for many years has been campaigning tirelessly in the Russian media for the recognition of this group’s valuable contribution to Russian society and the economy. This organization was based in Moscow, with several branches across Russia. At the same time, however, Tajik Labour Migrants operated as a lucrative business, which used to charge migrants relatively high fees for its services, which ranged from specialist legal consultations to routine assistance in obtaining essential documents and permits. The organization claimed up to 50% commission for assistance in winning legal cases against unfair employers (*Ruspres*, 2011). In 2016, the organization was shut down by Russian authorities on charges of administrative violations (regarding inaccuracies concerning the official status of the organization vis-à-vis its actual scope of activities). In December 2017, following a series of small-scale protests of Tajik labour migrants against discrimination and working conditions in Russia, Sharipov was stripped of his Russian citizenship, which he had allegedly acquired unlawfully, and deported from Russia to Tajikistan.

The role that such diaspora organizations are playing in providing essential support to labour migrants—whether as part of the politics of human rights or simply for profit (rather than as part of some kind of “diasporic” communitarian solidarity)—is due partly to the political weakness of the labour migrants as a social group (both in Tajikistan and even more so in Russia) and partly to the fact that the Tajik government does not recognize labour migrants’ “utility”, and does not actively engage with them.

The lack of interest in labour migrants on the part of the Tajik state has led to two very different effects affecting the relationship between labour migrants and the “old” emigrant communities. On the one hand, some of the “old diaspora” organizations are assuming certain roles that would in other circumstances be performed by Tajik state structures: by providing some of the essential bureaucratic support (Interview 4), these organizations are effectively serving as substitutes for Tajik consular services. This is also because labour migrants themselves often seek to avoid interacting directly with Tajik officialdom, perceiving it as unhelpful, inefficient or corrupt (Interview 2). On the other hand, this disassociation of labour migrants from the Tajik state exposes labour migrants to exploitation by the “old”
emigrant communities themselves (ILO, 2010, p. 39). There have, in fact, been cases of Tajiks from the established émigré communities employing newly-arriving labour migrants but refusing to pay them wages (Asia Plus, 2012; Interview 4). Unscrupulous Tajik businessmen have also been known to overcharge their fellow countrymen for certain sensitive services, such as the repatriation of the bodies of deceased labourers (Interview 5).

CONCLUSION

This article has sought to trace the different origins, development and agency of the complex and heterogeneous socio-political activism within the Tajik emigrant communities. Our primary focus has been on the political field that has formed between the Tajik emigrant communities and their “homeland”. We have looked at a number of exemplary diaspora organizations in their relationship to the Tajik state, with the understanding that these organizations do not exactly “represent” Tajik emigrant communities as such. Whether loyal, neutral or oppositional in their relationship to the Tajik state, these organizations are invariably elite formations that vary considerably in terms of their public visibility, purported functions, and success in mobilizing parts of Tajik emigrant communities for specific socio-political purposes. The disconnectedness of diaspora organizations from the life of labour migrants, as well as cases of the misuse of social networks by these organizations or examples of labour exploitation of their compatriots are a major reason for the absence of broader support for the political activities of elites among the much more numerous labour migrants.

We have stressed the heterogeneity of the Tajik “diaspora” and the diversity of the forms and degrees of mobilization within it, which caused us to conceptualize it as a “Tajik emigrant community complex”. We have argued that every kind of political activity within Tajik emigrant communities is in the first place a reaction to the conditions that had made a particular group leave their home country and at the same time to the conditions in which they then found themselves in the host country. Our examples have ranged from those cooperating closely with the Tajik state to those calling for the overthrow of the Tajik government; from organizations serving legitimizing cultural-diplomatic functions to those acting as de facto substitutes for consular services; from successful businessmen who are being enticed to
invest resources in their home country to opposition activists who are being persecuted by the state even when in exile.

We have also stressed the importance that the Tajik government’s evolving policies towards the Tajik emigrant community complex (which began in the 1990s and continue to this day) have had on the political organization, identity and activities of the Tajik emigrant communities themselves. Indeed, much of the socio-political activism among emigrant communities is shaped quite directly by the policies and strategies of the Tajik state itself. We have argued, however, that different parts of the Tajik emigrant complex, i.e. the different emigrant categories and communities within it, are perceived quite differently by the Tajik authorities. They are understood as possessing different levels of “perceived utility” and are made to perform very different functions for the Tajik state.

This in turn means that the policies that the Tajik state is developing towards the different Tajik emigrant communities are both multi-tiered and strategically targeted. Some parts of the emigrant community complex (e.g. wealthy entrepreneurs and cultural organizations) appear to have a clearly defined function for the state, resulting in the deployment of very specific instruments of positive engagement with these groups. Other groups (opposition activists from both “old” and “young” transnational emigrant communities; as well as young transnational elites studying at Islamic universities abroad) are perceived by the government as a threat, and are engaged with by means ranging from control to repression. There are also other parts of the complex (labour migrants and young transnational elites oriented towards the West), whose “utility” is yet to be established and towards whom the Tajik authorities are, for the time being, showing ambivalence or disinterest, failing, as a consequence, to develop a distinctive range of policies in relation to them.
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Interviews

Interview 1: a former official involved in shaping of Tajik migration policies (Dushanbe, 21.08.2015).

Interview 2: a lawyer with a long experience in consulting and legal cases of migrant workers in Moscow (Dushanbe, 12.08.2015).

Interview 3: an entrepreneur whose company used to send Tajik students abroad in the late-2000s (Dushanbe, 10.08.2016).

Interview 4: informal communication with a Tajik civil servant (Dushanbe, November 2014).

Interview 5: an employee of a non-governmental organization in the Russian Federation offering legal help to Tajik migrants (Dushanbe, 12.08.2015)