



# International Migration in Pandemic Times: Disrupted Links, Remittances and Migrantophobia

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# Introduction

The COVID-19 pandemic has severely limited international migration due to border closures and has forced millions of people to return home. According to expert estimates,<sup>1</sup> the pandemic reduced the number of international migrants by the middle of 2020 by about 2 million people: to 281 million people instead of the expected 283 million people. In 2020, immigration to the countries of the Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD) was half what it had been in 2019; in Canada the number of immigrants decreased by 45%, and in Australia – by 70%. To compensate the negative impact on its economy, Canada launched a recruitment programme to bring in 400,000 immigrants in 2021, 2022 and 2023. The number of migrants who came to Saudi Arabia decreased by 90%.<sup>2</sup>

The pandemic partly realised a hypothetical situation long idealised among migrantophobes: “how much better it would be if the migrants went back where they came from.” Although some, rather than all migrants returned to their homelands, the host countries were able to really feel what it was like to do without them.

COVID-19 has greatly affected territorial mobility both between countries and regions, and within specific states. As a result, migration flows and remittances declined, accompanied by a rise in migrantophobia and xenophobia in the main destination countries. These crises overlapped with the fact that migration has been a major political issue in North America and Europe over the past years.

However, the pandemic could have even more lasting and quite unpredictable outcomes, in view of the fact that the sharp decline in migration flows, and in some cases their complete disruption, coincided with a structural realignment of the labour market, which had a negative impact on the socioeconomic situation in the countries of origin, as well as destination countries. The 2020-2021 crisis may lead to a radical shift in sentiment toward migration, especially when it comes to migrant workers, which could prompt various political parties and social groups to change their political platforms.

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<sup>1</sup>Ekaterina Shcherbakova. Mezhdunarodnaya migraciya po ocenkam OON 2020 goda [International migration according to UN estimates 2020] // *Demoskop Weekly*. № 889–890. 2021. URL: <http://demoscope.ru/weekly/2021/0889/barom01.php> URL : <http://demoscope.ru/weekly/2021/0889/barom01.php>

<sup>2</sup>Sylvie Kauffmann. Au-delà de 2021, la pandémie continuera de bouleverser les flux migratoires // *Le Monde*. 17 mars 2021. URL: [https://www.lemonde.fr/idees/article/2021/03/17/au-dela-de-2021-la-pandemie-continuera-de-bouleverser-les-flux-migratoires\\_6073390\\_3232.html](https://www.lemonde.fr/idees/article/2021/03/17/au-dela-de-2021-la-pandemie-continuera-de-bouleverser-les-flux-migratoires_6073390_3232.html); <https://www.inopressa.ru/article/17Mar2021/lemonde/migration.html>

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# Changes in global migration flows due to *COVID-19*. Use of foreign migrant workers in Russia and other major destination countries

## Outside Russia

The destination countries for migrants can be divided into several distinct groups.

The **first** group includes traditional destinations. Apart from the United States, it is composed of Canada, Australia, New Zealand, Israel and South Africa, with the latter losing skilled, educated professionals, while attracting migrant workers from elsewhere. For many generations, these countries have been committed to attracting both migrants and foreign elites. The United States ranks first in terms of the number of incoming migrants with 44.9 million people or 13.7% of its population born outside the country as of 2019 – the highest figure in the past century.<sup>3</sup>

The **second** group consists of countries that used to be at the core of multinational imperial structures. With the disappearance of the empires these countries received substantial migration flows of two main types: first came British, French, Turkish or other migrants returning from the colonies or overseas territories to their respective homelands, followed by migrants from the third world, primarily from the corresponding colonies and speaking the language of their former mother country. These people mostly consisted of post-colonial elites, at least in the early days of migration.

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<sup>3</sup>U.S. Immigrant Population and Share over Time, 1850 – Present. *Migration Policy Institute*. URL: <https://www.migrationpolicy.org/programs/data-hub/charts/immigrant-population-over-time>

The **third** group represents countries that have been experiencing explosive economic growth over the past decades and had to attract massive incoming migration flows including both skilled and unskilled workers. The Persian Gulf nations are a case in point here. Countries like Brunei, Singapore with a number of other Southeast Asian nations, as well as Nigeria and Venezuela at specific historical periods, and several countries with tourism-driven economies also belong in this group. For many of them, these policies led to deep-running social fractures between citizens and immigrants, who often lacked legal status and were deprived of any rights. In addition, it is not uncommon for migrants to stand out compared to the local population in terms of language and religion, which takes on special importance in the case of the split between Shia and Sunni Muslims. The authoritarian nature of the political system in these countries and the weakness of civil society make the situation there even more complicated. That said, migrants already account for more than half of the population in a number of these destination countries. Specifically, in 2013, migrants accounted for 84% of the population in the UAE, 74% in Qatar, 60% in Kuwait and 55% in Bahrain.<sup>4</sup> In 2019, there were as many as 35 million migrants in the Persian Gulf countries, Jordan and Lebanon, and 31% of them were women. In total, migrant workers account on average for 70.4% of the workforce in the Gulf countries, ranging from 56% to 93%, depending on the country.<sup>5</sup>

Quite often, migrants are openly discriminated against, and suffer due to weak civil society and strict restrictions of their rights.

The **fourth** group includes a number of countries that perform several migration-related roles simultaneously as countries of origin, destination countries and/or transit countries. This is the case with Russia and all other BRICS countries, as well as a number of countries in Southern and Eastern Europe, and post-Soviet republics.

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<sup>4</sup> Christopher Inken. 7 Facts About World Migration. *Pew Research Center*. URL: <http://www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2014/09/02/7-facts-about-world-migration/>

<sup>5</sup> Labour Migration. *International Labour Organization*. URL: <https://www.ilo.org/beirut/areasofwork/labour-migration/lang--en/index.htm>

The pandemic has affected migration policies and attitudes towards migrants in countries belonging to all four groups, with apparent differences both between and within nations.

For instance, the situation in the United States, a traditional destination for migrants, is something of a paradox. The pandemic has coincided there with the growing polarisation of American society under Donald Trump, including on the migration issue. In fact, Trump was the first to place this topic at the heart of his election campaign, winning substantial support from voters in 2015 and 2016. This may be due to the fact that his anti-immigration stance was viewed as veiled criticism of affirmative action, a policy of empowering various minorities, and as a rebuke of the migration policies enacted after the 1965 migration reform. Before its adoption the immigration system favoured people from Western Europe, mostly through discriminatory regional quotas introduced back in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century. But the Immigration and Nationality Act of 1965 turned the immigration policy upside down, opening the country to migrants from the third world, as well as allowing for family reunions and skilled immigration. This led to a decline in the share of European migrants from about 90% all the way down into the single digits.

Among the most shocking statements by Trump that scared the elites, as well as part of the electorate, the most was the promise to expel illegal immigrants, who numbered 11 million at the time, with most of them coming to the US legally, but losing their status afterwards. Trump also suggested temporarily banning people from a number of Muslim countries from entering the US. This led for a 2.8-fold decline in the number of inbound refugees from 84,998 in 2016 to 29,916 by 2019.<sup>6</sup> Overall, the US president issued more than 400 executive orders on migration policy in 2017-2021, with most of them designed to tighten regulations in this sphere.

These policy shifts overlapped with a general rise of xenophobia in foreign and domestic policy, driven by the pandemic. After all, it was Trump who insisted on referring to COVID-19 as the “Chinese virus.” The

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<sup>6</sup> 2019 Yearbook of Immigration Statistics. U.S. Department of Homeland Security. Office of Immigration Statistics. September 2020. P. 39. URL: [https://www.dhs.gov/sites/default/files/publications/immigration-statistics/yearbook/2019/yearbook\\_immigration\\_statistics\\_2019.pdf](https://www.dhs.gov/sites/default/files/publications/immigration-statistics/yearbook/2019/yearbook_immigration_statistics_2019.pdf)



temporary closures of most of US consular offices, and strict limitations on passenger air travel with other countries, as well as medical restrictions for people entering the United States fed into this sentiment. As a result, many of those who had already received work permits, study visas or had their family reunification, asylum or other legitimate applications approved found themselves unable to come to the United States. In 2020, the number of immigrant visas dropped 45% compared to a year earlier, and the number of nonimmigrant visas issued decreased by 54%.<sup>7</sup>

The decision by the US president to limit the number of H1B visas issued to skilled workers came as a surprise, since prior to that Trump had mostly focused on opposing the arrival of illegal and unskilled migrants. The issuance of temporary H1B and H2B visas to non-agricultural workers was also suspended.

The persistent refusal by the White House to abide by the Flores Settlement Agreement (FSA) was perhaps the most egregious move on migration policy. Adopted in 1997, the agreement regulated care for immigrant children detained when crossing the border. Under the Trump presidency, more than 5,500 families were separated under the formal pretext of protecting child immigrants. In most cases, actions by the migration authorities had a negative bearing on migrant children, giving rise to much controversy and tension in American society.

The White House terminated the Central American Minors Programme (CAM) back in 2017. Announced as far back as in 2014 by then-Vice President Biden with Barack Obama in the White House, this programme enabled parents from the Northern Triangle (El Salvador, Guatemala, and Honduras), who were lawfully present in the United States, to request a refugee or parole status for their children and a number of other relatives who had stayed behind in their countries of origin.

The Trump administration introduced tight restrictions on the Temporary Protected Status (TPS), a programme operated by the Department of Homeland Security and designed to give temporary status

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<sup>7</sup> Muzaffar Chisti, Jessica Bolter. The 'Trump Effect' on Legal Immigration Levels: More Perception than Reality? // *Migration Information Source*. Migration Policy Institute. November 20, 2020. URL: <https://www.migrationpolicy.org/article/trump-effect-immigration-reality>

to refugees from countries suffering from conflict, natural disasters or other emergencies. Between 2016 and 2020, El Salvador, Honduras, Haiti, Nicaragua, Nepal and Sudan were excluded from the programme, depriving more than 400,000 people of the chance to obtain legal status in the US. It is worth noting that these discriminatory measures failed to take effect after courts weighed in to block them. By the end of the Trump presidency applicants from ten underdeveloped countries were still eligible to apply under this programme.

Trump also revised a number of provisions of the Deferred Enforced Departure (DED), a programme that enables the president to grant temporary protected status to people from countries affected by political instability, by intensifying its ideological orientation. In particular, some 200,000 Venezuelan refugees were added to the programme, while 3,600 Liberian citizens lost protected status (Liberian nationals traditionally received beneficial treatment due to the history of Liberia's statehood). People from other countries are not covered by this programme.

The Diversity Immigrant Visa Program (DV) turned out to be especially controversial. Often referred to as the State Department's annual "green card lottery," it is designed to diversify the immigrant population. On the campaign trail ahead of the 2016 election, Trump referred to DV as a national security threat creating a loophole for extremist, especially Islamist, groups and ideologies, and called for its termination. Thousands of valid green card holders were unable to enter US territory on time due to the pandemic and related restrictions, losing their status.

## Russia

Migrant workers have been a regular fixture of the Russian labour market, and many of them have come to see Russia as their second home and are ready to commit their future to this country. However, the pandemic forced many of them to return to their countries of origin, where they get little, if any, support, while unemployment is high. Russia needs migrant workers, and they are eager to return to this country. Still, unhindered migration flows within the Eurasian migration system have so far failed to materialise.

The overall number of foreigners fell drastically with the pandemic, just like the flow of migrant workers. According to migration records, the number of foreigners *registered at the place of residence* halved from 18.95 million in 2019 to 9.34 million in 2020. This figure included 4.18 million *newly arrived* foreigners (down from 13.86 million in 2019), of whom 2.36 million came to Russia to *work* (down from 5.48 million in 2019), another 870,000 came on *private visits* (2.52 million in 2019), 265,000 came to *study* (682,000 in 2019), 384,000 said that they were *tourists* (4.19 million in 2019), and 303,000 came for *other purposes* (992,000 in 2019).

The term migrant worker is primarily understood in Russia as meaning people from Central Asia. In fact, their share in the overall migrant flow has been increasing over the years. In 2016, they accounted for 63% of all migrant workers totalling 2.7 million, but in 2019 their representation increased to 71% and 3.9 million people, respectively, and inched up even higher in 2020 to 75% or 1.8 million. In 2020, Russia welcomed 1.011 million migrant workers from Uzbekistan or 43% of the total incoming foreign labourers, 507,300 or 22% arrived from Tajikistan, and another 190,300 or 8% from Kyrgyzstan. As of May 1, 2021, the number of migrant workers who stated “employment” as the purpose of their visit to Russia when crossing the border stood at 2.68 million, with Central Asian countries accounting for three quarters of this figure. Compared to May 2020, the number of migrant workers fell by more than a third (down 35%), and compared to May 2019, the decline reached 38%, two out of every five migrants having left the country.<sup>8</sup>

Of course, this drop was attributable to the fact that economic sectors that traditionally served as the primary employers for migrant workers, especially the services sector, suffered the most from the pandemic. To overcome the crisis, employers started laying off their staff or reducing working hours, starting with migrants, especially those with little experience and who could be easily replaced whenever needed. Unemployment was the main factor driving migrant workers out of Russia. Many Russians lost their jobs as well. According to an opinion

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<sup>8</sup> Nikita Mkrtchyan, Yuliya Florinskaya. Migraciya: osnovnye trendy yanvarya-fevralya 2021 goda [Migration: Main trends in January-February 2021] // *Monitoring ekonomicheskoy situacii v Rossii. Tendencii i vyzovy social'no-ekonomicheskogo razvitiya* [Monitoring of Russia's Economic Outlook. Trends and Challenges of Socio-Economic Development]. No. 10 (142), 2021.

survey carried out in 2020, between 10%<sup>9</sup> and 25%<sup>10</sup> of Russian workers lost their jobs with the introduction of lockdowns, while these figures for migrant workers were in the range of 40% to 45%.<sup>11</sup>

The economic crisis led to a decline in consumer purchasing power, which in turn had a major impact on the informal economy, reducing the number of available jobs. On March 18, 2020 the Russian government restricted entry into the country for foreign nationals and stateless persons,<sup>12</sup> bringing many enterprises dependent on migrant labor to a halt or substantially undermining their operations. One sector that was strongly affected was the hospitality industry, including restaurants and hotels, cleaning services, trade and, to an extent, the construction industry. As a result, the finances of many migrants took a hit in 2020, forcing many of them to consider returning home in order to wait out all this uncertainty.

According to a survey carried out by the office of the International Organisation for Migration (IOM) in Russia between autumn 2020 and the winter of 2021 covering a sample of 900 migrant workers from Tajikistan, Kyrgyzstan and Uzbekistan,<sup>13</sup> 69% of migrant households said that their situation had worsened due to the COVID-19 pandemic. This was attributable to a number of reasons: lower pay or insufficient income (44%) and psychological stress (36%). During the pandemic, 28% of respondents lost their jobs, and 11% acquired debt in 2020. In addition, 9% said that they had to skimp on food, and 2% suffered from poorer access to healthcare services. Only 28% of the respondents among Central Asian migrants said that nothing had changed for them. Psychological stress came up more frequently in interviews with women (44%) than with men (28%).

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<sup>9</sup>Vladimir Gimpelson, Rostislav Kapelyushnikov. Karantinnaya ekonomika i rynek truda [Quarantine economics and the labor market] // ECONS. June 2, 2020. URL: <https://econs.online/articles/ekonomika/karantinnaya-ekonomika-i-rynok-truda>

<sup>10</sup>Karina Pipiya. Ot izolyatsii k migratsii [From isolation to migration] // Vedomosti. June 3, 2020. URL: <https://www.vedomosti.ru/opinion/articles/2020/06/03/831861-izolyatsii-migratsii>

<sup>11</sup>Mikhail Denisenko, Vladimir Mukomel. Trudovaya migratsiya v Rossii v period koronavirusnoj pandemii [Labour migration in Russia during the coronavirus pandemic] // *Demograficheskoe obozrenie [Demographic Review]*, 2020. 7(3), 84-107. URL: <https://demreview.hse.ru/article/view/11637>

<sup>12</sup>Government Directive No. 635-R dated 16 March 2020. URL: <http://government.ru/docs/39179/>

<sup>13</sup>Otchet po rezultatam issledovaniya sotsialno-politicheskikh posledstviy pandemii COVID-19 na migrantov, prebyvayuschich na territorii Rossiiskoi Federatsii (Report based on the survey of socioeconomic consequences of the COVID-19 pandemic for migrants residing in the Russian Federation). URL: [http://moscow.iom.int/sites/default/files/survey\\_rf\\_covid\\_2021\\_small.pdf](http://moscow.iom.int/sites/default/files/survey_rf_covid_2021_small.pdf)

The Russian government has taken a number of measures<sup>14</sup> to help migrants living in the country during the pandemic,<sup>15</sup> Some of these temporary relief measures will stay in force until September 30, 2021. However, this does little to mitigate the severe blow suffered by migrant-intensive sectors of the Russian labour market during the pandemic. Just like all other destination countries for migrant workers, it will take the Russian economy a long time to recover, while the structural changes resulting from the rise of remote work will require migrant workers to master new digital skills as they gradually return to the Russian labour market.

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## The disruptive effect of *COVID-19* on country-to-country ties and the socioeconomic situation in the migrant workers' countries of origin

### Outside Russia

Migrants account for a substantial share of the population in many of the countries that were worst affected by the pandemic. In fact, immigrants accounted for at least 3.7% of the population in 14 of the 20 countries with the highest number of COVID-19 cases (compared to a global average of 3.6%), and this share exceeds 7% in nine of these countries.<sup>16</sup>

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<sup>14</sup>Presidential Executive Order No. 274 of April 18, 2020 on temporary measures to regularize foreign nationals and stateless people in the Russian Federation in connection with the threat of the novel coronavirus (COVID-19) spreading further. URL: <http://publication.pravo.gov.ru/Document/View/0001202004180001>; Letter of the Russian Interior Ministry No. 1/2964 dated March 19, 2020 on additional measures to prevent the spread of the coronavirus infection 2019-nCoV. URL: <https://www.garant.ru/products/ipo/prime/doc/73754036/>

<sup>15</sup>Alexandra Dokuchayeva. Novye migratsionnye pravila na period pandemii [New pandemic-era migration rules] // *Forum pereselencheskih organizacij* [Migrant Organizations Forum]. April 8, 2020. URL: <https://migrant.ru/novye-migracionnye-pravila-na-period-pandemii-dlya-ig-i-lbg/>

<sup>16</sup>Migration Data Relevant for the COVID-19 Pandemic // *Migration Data Portal*. March 2021. URL: <https://migrationdataportal.org/themes/migration-data-relevant-covid-19-pandemic>

Most countries responded to the pandemic by imposing restrictions on the mobility of migrants, as well as on many NGOs, including those involved in humanitarian assistance. Between March 11, 2020 when the World Health Organisation declared a global COVID-19 pandemic, and February 22, 2021, some 105,000 travel-related measures were issued around the world. At the same time, a total of 189 countries, territories or areas have issued 795 exemptions enabling mobility despite the travel restrictions.<sup>17</sup>

As a result, by mid-2020 migration flows decreased by 2 million people compared to pre-pandemic forecasts.<sup>18</sup> Consular statistics show that migration to OECD countries fell in the first six months of 2020 by an unprecedented 46%.<sup>19</sup>

Apart from workforce shortages, a sharp decline in immigration flows impacts the demographic outlook of many destination countries. In particular, Australia reported a net outflow of 72,000 people in 2020-2021, a first since 1945, as well as the slowest population growth of just 0.2% over the same period. It is estimated that by 2031 the country will have 1.1 million fewer people than it would have had in the absence of COVID-19.<sup>20</sup>

According to the available estimates, Germany reported no population growth in 2020 for the first time in ten years, which is primarily attributable to a decline in migration.<sup>21</sup>

The situation in the United States reflects the imbalances in the country's labour market. On the one hand, the unemployment rate

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<sup>17</sup> COVID-19 Travel Restrictions Output – 22 February 2021. Flow Monitoring. *International Organization for Migration*. February 25, 2021. URL: <https://migration.iom.int/reports/covid-19-travel-restrictions-output-%E2%80%9422-february-2021?close=true>

<sup>18</sup> International Migrant Stock. *United Nations Population Division*, 2020. URL: <https://www.un.org/development/desa/pd/content/international-migrant-stock>

<sup>19</sup> International Migration Outlook. *OECD*, 2020. URL: [https://www.oecd-ilibrary.org/social-issues-migration-health/international-migration-outlook-2020\\_ec98f531-en](https://www.oecd-ilibrary.org/social-issues-migration-health/international-migration-outlook-2020_ec98f531-en)

<sup>20</sup> Population Statement. *Australian Government Centre for Population*. URL: <https://population.gov.au/publications/publications-population-statement.html>

<sup>21</sup> No Population Growth Expected for 2020. *German Federal Statistics Office*. January 12, 2021. URL: [https://www.destatis.de/DE/Presse/Pressemitteilungen/2021/01/PD21\\_016\\_12411.html](https://www.destatis.de/DE/Presse/Pressemitteilungen/2021/01/PD21_016_12411.html)

dropped by three percentage points in May 2021 compared to April, and the number of unemployed declined by 496,000 people to 9.3 million or 5.8% of the working-age population.<sup>22</sup> In April, 998,000 jobs were created in the US, bringing openings to the highest level since the US Department of Labour started keeping track of these numbers. This figure includes 391,000 jobs in the leisure and hospitality sectors, 108,000 jobs in trade and transport and 102,000 in manufacturing.<sup>23</sup>

In June, the US added another 850,000 jobs. That said, the overall figures are still much lower than in February 2020, when only 5.7 million or just 3.5% of the working-age population did not have a job.<sup>24</sup> As of July 1, the unemployment rate stood at 5.9% with 9.5 million people searching for jobs.<sup>25</sup> Still, the economy is clearly recovering.

Nevertheless employers are unable to fill millions of vacancies. Of almost a million jobs created in April, only 69,000 were actually filled, or just one in fifteen positions. This paradox was especially apparent in the construction sector with the creation of 107,000 jobs, while actual employment shrank by 23,000 people. The same applies to manufacturing with 102,000 and 38,000 respectively. This leads to supply disruptions, drives up costs and prices and undermines discipline, as well as slowing down many companies, including in the services sector. A Chamber of Commerce survey found that 90.5% of companies said a lack of available workers was slowing the economy in their area, which was twice as many as cited pandemic issues. The American Hotel and Lodging Association reported that 96% of its respondents had job vacancies.<sup>26</sup>

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<sup>22</sup> Economic New Release: *Employment Summary*. US Bureau of Labor Statistics. June 4, 2021. URL: <https://www.bls.gov/news.release/empsit.nr0.htm>

<sup>23</sup> The Great American Labor Shortage // *The Wall Street Journal*. June 8, 2021. URL: <https://www.wsj.com/articles/the-great-american-labor-shortage-11623191784>

<sup>24</sup> Economic New Release: *Employment Summary*. US Bureau of Labor Statistics. June 4, 2021. URL: <https://www.bls.gov/news.release/empsit.nr0.htm>

<sup>25</sup> Economic New Release: *Employment Summary*. US Bureau of Labor Statistics. July 2, 2021. URL: <https://www.bls.gov/news.release/empsit.nr0.htm>

<sup>26</sup> The Great American Labor Shortage // *The Wall Street Journal*. June 8, 2021. URL: <https://www.wsj.com/articles/the-great-american-labor-shortage-11623191784>

The current situation on the labour market mostly stems from the ongoing restructuring as more and more people choose to work from home, coupled with weekly stimulus cheques of \$600 and then \$300. Considering that the Biden administration has extended these relief measures until the fall of 2021, it will take much longer for millions of people, primarily low-paid workers, to get back to work.

Accordingly, many employers are very interested in having as many people as possible in the workforce, since this would not only enable them to employ the people they need, but also help prevent higher wage expectations and improve discipline. With this in mind, businesses are likely to oppose any measures aimed at restricting incoming migration.

## Russia

In Russia, after the breakdown of ties due to the pandemic and the return of some of the migrants to their homeland, industries that had relied on migrant employees began to experience labour shortages. The construction industry felt this outflow so sharply that the authorities began to discuss special measures and programmes to compensate for the new deficit.<sup>27</sup> A similar situation was seen around the world. Agriculture in Australia and Germany<sup>28</sup> also felt the closure of borders and restrictions on labour migration acutely, as well as the medical sector in the OECD, in which a quarter of the staff comes from other

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<sup>27</sup> List of assignments following a joint meeting of the State Council and the Council for Strategic Development and National Projects. January 16, 2021 URL: <http://www.kremlin.ru/acts/assignments/orders/64900>; Veronika Kulakova, Ekaterina Yasakova. Kadrovaya epidemiya: iz-za nekhvatki migrantov sryvayutsya sroki vvoda zil'ya [Human resources epidemic: due to a shortage of migrants, the deadlines for commissioning housing are disrupted] // *Izvestiya*. December 23, 2020. URL: <https://iz.ru/1103166/veronika-kulakova-ekaterina-iasakova/kadrovaia-epidemiia-iz-za-nekhvatki-migrantov-sryvaiutsia-sroki-vvoda-zhilia>

<sup>28</sup> Olga Meshcheryagina. A rabotat' kto budet? [Who will work?] // *Expert.ru*. April 15, 2020. URL: <https://expert.ru/2020/04/15/a-rabotat-kto-budet-u-agrariev-nachalsya-kadrovyyj-golod/>; Evropejskie fermery stolknulis' s deficitom rabochej sily [European farmers face labor shortages] // *Vesti.Ru*. April 15, 2020. URL: <https://www.vesti.ru/finance/article/2399133>



countries<sup>29</sup> ( especially the UK, which has extended visas in the health sector until the end of 2021).

In the main countries of origin of Russian-bound migrants, primarily the Central Asian nations, the socioeconomic situation deteriorated during the pandemic.

According to the World Bank, in **Kyrgyzstan** poverty increased from 20% to 31% in 2020, and could reach 35% in 2021.<sup>30</sup> Some 700,000 people lived below the poverty line in 2020 – a significant number for a country with a total population of just 6.6 million. Figures reported by Kyrgyzstan’s National Statistics Committee were slightly lower with poverty at 25.3% in 2020, up 5.2% year-on-year. Kyrgyz citizens living in poverty number 1.68 million, with 74% of them residing in rural areas. As many as 833,900 young people under 17 years (31.8%) lived in poverty in 2020.<sup>31</sup> Ensuring stable jobs for working-age people is viewed as the main tool for fighting poverty. However, the effectiveness of these efforts has been undermined by rising unemployment, high inflation and pandemic-related restrictions on travel to Kazakhstan and Russia.

**Tajikistan** sent 129,000 workers to Russia in 2020, which is just a third of the 2019 figures.<sup>32</sup> This led to a sharp rise in unemployment and poverty in the country. A fall in remittances forced households to curb their spending. Public and private investment also decreased compared to pre-pandemic levels. The safety cushion that households can rely on in Tajikistan is very thin, making it impossible for them to manage for long

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<sup>29</sup> “Korona” podbiraet kadry [COVID selects personnel] // *Rossijskaya gazeta*. № 87(8141). 21.04.2020 URL: <https://rg.ru/2020/04/21/kak-pandemiia-covid-19-izmenila-rynok-truda-v-mire.html>

<sup>30</sup> Naselenie Kirgizii stremitelno nishchayet – za chertoi bednosti kazhdiy tretii [Kyrgyzstan’s population is rapidly sliding into poverty] // *REGNUM*. March 16, 2021. URL: <https://regnum.ru/news/economy/3216393.html>

<sup>31</sup> Kazhdyi chetvertyi kyrgyzstanets zhivet v bednosti [One in four people in Kyrgyzstan lives in poverty] // *Sputnik Kyrgyzstan*, June 13, 2021. URL: <https://ru.sputnik.kg/society/20210613/1052850527/kyrgyzstan-nacstatkom-bednost-regiony-deti.html>

<sup>32</sup> Chislo vyekhavshih iz Tadjhikistana na zarabotki snizilos’ na 57% za polugodie [The number of people who left Tajikistan to work decreased by 57% in half a year] // *Interfax*. July 23, 2020. URL: <https://www.interfax.ru/world/718693>

without income gained from working abroad. By September 2020, the country's foreign debt to GDP ratio reached almost 40%, up from 36.6% as of the end of 2019.<sup>33</sup> The pandemic had a major impact on incomes inside the country and on its job market. Travel restrictions pushed non-food prices up, with annual inflation reaching 5.5% in October 2020, up from 4% in April 2020 and 4.8% in 2019.<sup>34</sup>

**Uzbekistan's** economy and labour market suffered greatly from the decline in labour migration, instantly affecting the most vulnerable social groups. An opinion survey carried out as part of the Listening to the Citizens of Uzbekistan project showed that the self-employed, whose incomes were low to begin with, suffered the most from the drop in employment.<sup>35</sup> In December 2020, 65% of households did not have any savings, up 14% year-on-year, while more than 24% of respondents said that their financial situation had worsened. In January 2021, more than 12% of households said that they were living in poverty, which is the highest level since the summer of 2019.

Almost 400,000 companies in Uzbekistan stopped working due to quarantine restrictions or had to scale down operations, leaving some 150,000 people without work. More than 200,000 families live below the poverty line. In addition to this, labour migrants who used to work abroad are returning to the country's job market. According to Uzbekistan's First Deputy Minister of Employment and Labour Relations Erkin Mukhitdinov, about half a million migrant workers returned to the country by the beginning of the summer.<sup>36</sup>

All in all, during the COVID era, the socioeconomic situation has taken a severe beating in the countries of origin of Russia-bound migrant workers, with labour migration playing an even greater role in the national economies.

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<sup>33</sup> Vneshnii dolg Tadjikistana dostig 40% VVP [Tajikistan's foreign debt reaches 40% of GDP] // *REGNUM*, December 24, 2020. URL: <https://regnum.ru/news/3150304.html>

<sup>34</sup> Tajikistan Economic Update – Fall 2020. Economic Slowdown Amid the Pandemic. *The World Bank*. 2021. URL: <https://www.worldbank.org/en/country/tajikistan/publication/economic-update-fall-2020>

<sup>35</sup> Listening to the Citizens of Uzbekistan. *The World Bank*. 2020. URL: <https://thedocs.worldbank.org/en/doc/06d0d932a7341ac10fa734ffcb91c103-0080062021/original/L2CU-COVID-19-Rev2020-Cleared-RUS.pdf>

<sup>36</sup> Erkin Mukhitdinov, *Rynok truda Uzbekistana ispytyvayet ogromnoye davlenie iz-za rosta bezrabortnykh [Uzbekistan's labor market under pressure from rising unemployment]*, May 31, 2020. URL: <https://www.podrobno.uz/cat/obchestvo/uzbekistana-ispytyvaet-ogromnoe-davlenie-iz-za-rosta-chisla-bezrabortnykh-erkin-mukhitdinov/>

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# Remittances during the pandemic

## Outside Russia

In its estimates released in October 2020, the World Bank projected a 14% decline in the amount of money migrant workers sent home in 2020 compared to 2019. Remittance flows were projected to fall by 7%, from \$548 billion to \$508 billion in 2020, followed by a further decline of 7.5%, to \$470 billion in 2021.<sup>37</sup> However, the May 2021 data show that the decline was not as steep as initially projected with remittances at \$540 billion in 2020, down just 1.6% year-on-year.<sup>38</sup>

Apart from the drop in the number of migrant workers, the main factors contributing to declining remittances included a general slump in demand for workers, economic slowdown, insufficient state support measures for migrants, especially those working unreported jobs, as well as the depreciation of currencies in a number of destination countries for migrant workers.

At the same time, remittances remained at a quite substantial level, which can be explained by travels bans, sometimes going as far as suspending consular services, the fear of not being able to return to a destination country and the availability of government support to migrants, at least in some countries. In addition, many migrants have been willing to trim their own expenses in order to send more money to their families, and this has been coupled with rapid economic recovery in a number of countries, and the fact that in some cases migrants benefitted from changes in the prices of fuel and currency exchange rates.

Returning to the World Bank forecast, it has to be noted that remittances to Latin America and the Caribbean – the region that depends the most on the economic situation in the United States – were expected to come in at about \$96 billion in 2020, just 0.2% below

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<sup>37</sup> COVID-19: Remittance Flows Is to Shrink 14% by 2021. *The World Bank*. October 29, 2020. URL: <https://www.worldbank.org/en/news/press-release/2020/10/29/covid-19-remittance-flows-to-shrink-14-by-2021>

<sup>38</sup> Resilience: COVID-19 Crisis Through a Migration Lens. *Migration and Development Brief 34*. KNOMAD. May 2021. URL: [https://www.knomad.org/sites/default/files/2021-05/Migration%20and%20Development%20Brief%2034\\_1.pdf](https://www.knomad.org/sites/default/files/2021-05/Migration%20and%20Development%20Brief%2034_1.pdf)

the 2019 level, while money transfers to Colombia, El Salvador and the Dominican Republic increased in June-September 2020 compared to the same period in 2019, after falling sharply in April and May. Money flows to Mexico, another top recipient of remittances in Latin America, were expected to remain steady. One of the suggested explanations is that many migrants from Mexico were employed in essential services in the United States and eligible migrants also benefitted from US stimulus programs. Average remittance costs of sending \$200 rose slightly to 5.8%.<sup>39</sup>

Remittances to South Asia were projected to decline by around 4% in 2020 to \$135 billion, while remittance flows to East Asia were expected to fall by 11% to \$131 billion. China and the Philippines are the region's top recipients, while in terms of share of GDP the top recipients are Samoa and Tonga.<sup>40</sup>

Europe and post-Soviet republics are on both the receiving and giving ends as far as remittances are concerned, since in this region there are both countries of origin and destination for migrant workers. Remittances to countries in this region in 2020 were estimated to fall by 16% to \$48 billion. Coupled with a general economic slowdown, the depreciation of the Russian rouble was probably among the key factors in the decline of outward remittances from Russia. The average cost of sending \$200 to the region fell slightly to 6.5% in the third quarter of 2020 from 6.6% a year earlier.<sup>41</sup>

Remittance flows into Latin America and the Caribbean increased 6.5% in 2020, supported by a relatively rapid economic recovery in the United States. In South Asia, there was a slight moderation in the growth of remittance flows with a 5.2% increase, while flows to the Middle East and North Africa grew by a modest 2.3%. Flows to

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<sup>39</sup> COVID-19: Remittance Flows Is to Shrink 14% by 2021. *The World Bank*. October 29, 2020. URL: <https://www.worldbank.org/en/news/press-release/2020/10/29/covid-19-remittance-flows-to-shrink-14-by-2021>

<sup>40</sup> COVID-19: Remittance Flows Is to Shrink 14% by 2021. *The World Bank*. October 29, 2020. URL: <https://www.worldbank.org/en/news/press-release/2020/10/29/covid-19-remittance-flows-to-shrink-14-by-2021>

<sup>41</sup> COVID-19: Remittance Flows Is to Shrink 14% by 2021. *The World Bank*. October 29, 2020. URL: <https://www.worldbank.org/en/news/press-release/2020/10/29/covid-19-remittance-flows-to-shrink-14-by-2021>

Europe and Central Asia are estimated to have fallen by 9.7%, to East Asia and the Pacific by 7.9%, and to Sub-Saharan Africa by 12.5%. The top five remittance recipient countries were India, China, Mexico, the Philippines, and Egypt. In terms of share of GDP, by contrast, the top five recipients in 2020 were smaller economies: Tonga, Lebanon, Kyrgyz Republic, Tajikistan and El Salvador. The United States, the United Arab Emirates, Saudi Arabia and the Russian Federation were the largest source countries for remittances.<sup>42</sup>

## Russia

The pandemic has worsened the situation in countries where migrant families depend on remittances. The decrease in the scale of international migration has led to a drop of remittances of migrants to their home countries.<sup>43</sup> In 2020, private transborder remittances from Russia to the CIS countries (from where the main flow of migrants to Russia comes) was only 85.6% what it had been in 2019, for the countries of Central Asia (Tajikistan, Uzbekistan, Kyrgyzstan, Turkmenistan, and Kazakhstan), this figure was 85.4%. (Kyrgyzstan at 88% of the 2019 level, Tajikistan at 68%, Uzbekistan at 94%, Kazakhstan at 89%, Turkmenistan at 52%).<sup>44</sup> However, with the sole exception of Uzbekistan, the decline in other countries was comparable to the drop that occurred between 2018 and 2019. Tajikistan saw the biggest fall in cross-border money transfers in 2020 with a drop of about a third.

To illustrate the importance of remittances, we will examine money transfers by migrant workers from Central Asia, who constitute the biggest group of the Russia-bound migrant flows, to their families.

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<sup>42</sup> Resilience: COVID-19 Crisis Through a Migration Lens. *Migration and Development Brief 34*. KNOMAD. May 2021. URL: [https://www.knomad.org/sites/default/files/2021-05/Migration%20and%20Development%20Brief%2034\\_1.pdf](https://www.knomad.org/sites/default/files/2021-05/Migration%20and%20Development%20Brief%2034_1.pdf)

<sup>43</sup> Ksenia Bondarenko, Masshtaby vliyaniya pandemii na ekonomiku stran – netto-poluchatelej denezhnyh perevodov [The Impact of the COVID-19 Pandemic: The Case of Remittance Recipient Countries] // *Vestnik mezhdunarodnyh organizacij [International Organisations Research Journal]*. Vol. 15 No. 3 (2020). URL: <https://cyberleninka.ru/article/n/masshtaby-vliyaniya-pandemii-na-ekonomiku-stran-netto-poluchateley-denezhnyh-perevodov/viewer>

<sup>44</sup> Data of Central Bank of Russia. URL: [https://cbr.ru/hd\\_base/tg/](https://cbr.ru/hd_base/tg/)

According to a survey carried out by IOM's Office in Russia in late 2020 among 900 migrant workers from Uzbekistan, Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan, all of whom were employed at the time of the interviews,<sup>45</sup> only 12% of migrant workers did not send any money back home in 2020. Answering multiple choice questions, about half of the migrant workers said that they used various money transfer services like KoronaPay. About a third (34%) relied on internet banking or banking applications, and 27% used websites or applications of other payment services. The COVID-19 pandemic has had no noticeable impact on the way people transfer their remittances, as 96% of migrant workers have not changed their preferences in this regard. At the same time, there was a significant reduction in the amounts migrants sent to their countries of origin. At the height of the first wave between April and June 2020, 38% of respondents said that their remittances were smaller than usual, while 39% did not send any money back home at all. Remittances remained unchanged for less than a quarter of migrant workers, with 23% saying that they had sent the same amounts home as usual.

Quite often remittances provide a lifeline for the survival of households in the migrants' countries of origin. According to the 2020 IOM survey of migrant workers from Central Asia, about half of respondents (48%) were the main breadwinners in their families, while more than a third of them (35%) shared the burden of providing for their families with someone else. Therefore, financial support from migrants working in Russia is critical for two thirds of their families (65%) in Central Asian countries. Usually the main breadwinners are men, rather than women. In about two thirds of cases (65%) men account for most of the household income. This figure varies depending on the country with 71% in Uzbekistan, 46% in Kyrgyzstan and 77% in Tajikistan. In less than one third of cases (28%) men share the financial burden with another family member.

Nevertheless, in recent years Central Asian women have been playing an increasingly important role as earners for their families.

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<sup>45</sup> Otchet po rezultatam issledovaniya sotsialno-politicheskikh posledstviy pandemii COVID-19 na migrantov, prebyvayuschich na territorii Rossiiskoi Federatsii (Report based on the survey of socioeconomic consequences of the COVID-19 pandemic for migrants residing in the Russian Federation). URL: [http://moscow.iom.int/sites/default/files/survey\\_rf\\_covid\\_2021\\_small.pdf](http://moscow.iom.int/sites/default/files/survey_rf_covid_2021_small.pdf).

This is quite common for single-parent households. Labour migration sometimes results in separations when the husband leaves the household to create a new family. It is also not uncommon for single or divorced women to provide for their elderly parents, as well as children. There are also many families where both spouses are migrant workers, with women making as much as men. Among the Central Asian women taking part in the survey, 30% were the main earners in their families, with this indicator ranging from 33% for Kyrgyzstan to 29% for Uzbekistan and 28% for Tajikistan. Dual-earner households accounted for 42% of respondents, which means that for 72% (sic!) of respondents women contributed substantially to the family budget.

It is hard to overestimate the importance of remittances from Russia for the countries of origin of the labour migrants, and the pandemic has highlighted their critical role within the Eurasian migration framework.

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## Migrantophobia in pandemic times: same old story

### Outside Russia

Besides curbing migration flows, the pandemic has also led to a rise in migrant phobias and xenophobia in most destination countries. For example, the German anti-discrimination agency observed a rise in racist and anti-Semitic discrimination in light of the pandemic – as measured by the increase in complaints to the agency.<sup>46</sup> Of the 30,000 migrants and refugees surveyed by the World Health Organisation across

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<sup>46</sup>What Is the Impact of the COVID-19 Pandemic on Immigrants and Their Children? OECD Policy Responses to Coronavirus (COVID-19). *OECD*. October 19, 2020. URL: <https://www.oecd.org/coronavirus/policy-responses/what-is-the-impact-of-the-covid-19-pandemic-on-immigrants-and-their-children-e7cbb7de/#section-d1e1386>

different parts of the world, more than half said that COVID-19 had brought about a greater level of depression, fear, anxiety and loneliness. One in five also talked about a deterioration of mental health and increased use of drugs and alcohol.<sup>47</sup>

In an effort to prevent these negative trends from gaining momentum, a number of countries and international organisations launched awareness campaigns designed to influence public opinion, and, among other things, refute claims coming from certain political circles that immigration was somehow to blame for the pandemic. In this context, the United Nations issued a “guidance note” on addressing and countering propaganda and hate speech related to COVID-19, with a series of recommendations for governments and media. The IOM carried out a large-scale media campaign in co-operation with Mexico, specifically targeting populations in local communities with migrant shelters in order to shield migrants from accusations of spreading COVID-19. A number of local communities, such as Barcelona and New York, also launched communication campaigns to address xenophobic misinformation. The German anti-discrimination agency helps victims of discrimination obtain help. In Finland, the government launched a major nation-wide campaign on tackling misconceptions about the pandemic through social media influencers. In addition, some countries have publicly recognised the contribution of immigrants in the pandemic. For example, in France, immigrants working on the frontlines in fighting the pandemic, including medical staff and other professions, benefit from fast-track naturalisation procedures.<sup>48</sup>

In Europe, the pandemic has to be viewed in the context of the migration crisis of the 2010s in order to understand the differences in migration policies across the continent. Some EU members states, including Austria, Belgium, Cyprus, the Czech Republic, Estonia, Finland,

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<sup>47</sup> Migrants and Refugees Say COVID-19 Has Dramatically Worsened Their Lives. *World Health Organization*. December 18, 2020. URL: <https://www.who.int/news-room/feature-stories/detail/migrants-and-refugees-say-covid-19-has-dramatically-worsened-their-lives>

<sup>48</sup> What Is the Impact of the COVID-19 Pandemic on Immigrants and Their Children? OECD Policy Responses to Coronavirus (COVID-19). *OECD*. October 19, 2020. URL: <https://www.oecd.org/coronavirus/policy-responses/what-is-the-impact-of-the-covid-19-pandemic-on-immigrants-and-their-children-e7cbb7de/#section-d1e1386>



Ireland, Italy, Luxembourg, Malta, Poland, Portugal, Slovakia and Spain, started by closing their consular missions and immigration agencies or moving their operations online.<sup>49</sup> Strict restrictions on travel to and from the outside world were introduced.

As already mentioned above, the United States had been consumed by social, economic and political crises for several years when the pandemic broke out. In the US, the migration debate runs much deeper in terms of its social context, rooted in political struggles and the rapidly changing ethnic, racial, religious and socioeconomic fabric of American society.

On the one hand, in the early days of the pandemic the Trump administration stepped up its anti-immigration rhetoric, hammering home the message that first emerged when he announced his presidential run on June 16, 2015. This was the first time in contemporary US history that migration policy became a central pillar of an election campaign, while immigration policy was suddenly much more than a subject of political debate, turning into a means of political struggle and election campaigning.

While posing as a fighter against illegal migration, before the pandemic Donald Trump focused on preventing migrants belonging to specific ethnic, religious and professional groups from entering US territory, as well as reducing the inflow of migrants in general. In particular, he blocked Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals (DACA), an executive order signed by Barack Obama to enable about 650,000 people lacking legitimate status in the US, who were brought into the country by the parents when they were under 12 years old, to receive a period of deferred action from deportation and become eligible for a work permit or to enrol in educational institutions. In 2019, the Trump administration enacted the so-called Migrant Protection Protocols (MPP), also known as the Remain in Mexico programme whereby more than 60,000 people seeking refugee status were to stay in Mexico until courts decided on

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<sup>49</sup>The Impact of COVID-19 in the Migration Area in EU and OECD Countries. *EMN and OECD Umbrella Inform.* April 2021. Pp. 6-7. URL: <https://www.oecd.org/migration/mig/00-eu-emn-covid19-umbrella-inform-en.pdf>

their immigration applications. The immigration authorities also started rejecting applications from asylum seekers under Safe Third Country agreements.

Paradoxically enough, the pandemic and Trump's rhetoric notwithstanding, the migration debate ceased to be a primary concern during the 2020 election campaign, in contrast to 2016, making way for coronavirus-related matters, healthcare reform and the economy. With the Democratic primaries, the party veered to the left on all major policy issues, including migration. Joe Biden, a centrist, emerged as a compromise candidate, and had no choice but to include the main requirements of the radical left of his own party in his platform, including giving legitimate status to all these 11 million illegal migrants.

Upon his arrival at the White House on January 20, 2021, Biden cancelled some of the harsh anti-immigration measures of his predecessor and launched liberal reforms on multiple fronts, including migration. In particular, he instructed Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE) within the Department of Homeland Security<sup>50</sup> to review enforcement practices and introduced a 100-day moratorium on most deportations, although the federal court issued an injunction, so that deportations continued, even if at a somewhat slower pace. The President went on to suspend the Remain in Mexico programme and enabled 25,000 asylum seekers to enter US territory pending the review of their immigration applications by US courts.

Biden also reversed the ban on the entry of immigrants from the designated Muslim countries. He promised to rescind decisions by the preceding administration preventing people from a number of

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<sup>50</sup>The administrative reform carried out by George W. Bush in 2002 and 2003 created a super ministry in the form of the Department of Homeland Security with the transfer of the Immigration and Naturalisation Service (INS) from the Department of Justice. INS was divided into two separate entities: Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE) for fighting violations, searching and deporting illegal aliens, and the Citizenship and Immigration Services (CIS) in charge of working with legal migrants. In addition to this, the US Customs and Border Protection and a number of other units within the same department focus on fighting illegal immigration on the border.

other countries from accessing the temporary protected status, and also not to expel people with this status to countries that could be unsafe for them. The new president renewed deportation relief for Syrians, allowed them to file new applications under this programme and promised to review earlier decisions which ignored the individual circumstances faced by applicants. Holders of the temporary protected status would also be entitled to apply for US citizenship three years after receiving a green card. In addition, 3,600 Liberian citizens got their temporary protected status back after losing it under the preceding administration. The Central American Minors Programme was also restored.

Biden partially lifted the Trump-era freeze on issuing work visas to skilled foreign workers, although this has so far failed to produce any tangible results due to ongoing restrictions on the operation of many US consular missions. The new president also postponed the decision Trump took in the last days of his presidency to replace the lottery for applicants for H1B visas for skilled workers (the number of available visas being much lower than the number of applications filed by US employers, so that usually the quota is filled by May or June) by a selection process based on the expected salaries of the migrant workers. This could have a negative impact on SMEs and undermine the competitiveness of younger migrants who cannot aspire to high wages. Biden also rescinded Trump's plan to cancel work permits for some H1B dependents in possession of H4 visas. Instead, the president intends to issue an executive order enabling skilled spouses to receive work permits automatically, while also protecting their children from being "aged out" of their migration status after reaching a certain age.

The migration reform aims to remove country-specific visa quotas and improve the E-Verify migrant registration system. Unlike Trump, Biden spoke out in support of the immigration lottery and said that he intended to increase the corresponding annual migration quota from 55,000 to 80,000 people.

Biden ended Trump's policy of separating families of illegal migrants and ordered that special rules be devised to ensure that children of illegal migrants benefit from social protection.

The Trump-era freeze on DACA, an executive order signed by Obama, was lifted, opening the path to legal status to those eligible with a three-year transition period for applying for citizenship.

There are also plans to adopt the American Dream and Promise Act for codifying and expanding DACA's main provisions. Already passed by the House, the act may face a major challenge in the Senate, especially if the Democrats fail to complete the legislative process before the November 2022 midterms and January 2023 when the newly elected Congress will come into session. The same applies to Deferred Action for Parents of Americans and Lawful Permanent Residents (DAPA). Obama conceived this programme for providing legal status to the relatives of persons covered by DACA, Trump blocked it, and Biden promised to bring it back to life.

Biden's arrival at the White House even changed the terminology. Specifically, the current administration ordered government agencies to stop using the term "illegal alien" in official documents.

Some of Biden's actions and statements were viewed as an invitation for migrants to come to the United States, especially his electoral promises to legalise 11 million undocumented noncitizens, as well as his decision to stop building the wall on the border with Mexico. This led to a sharp increase in the number of migrants and refugees crossing into the United States from Mexico, which had a major impact on American public opinion. In May 2021, US border officials detained 180,034 people on the border with Mexico, the highest figure in 12 years. Of this number, 112,302 people were expelled from US territory under Trump's Title 42, which remained in effect under the new administration. The number of people detained for illegally crossing the border in the first five months of 2021 was double the same figure for all of 2020.<sup>51</sup>

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<sup>51</sup> Number of migrants at US border hits new record high // *BBC*. June 10, 2021. URL: <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-us-canada-57422618>

## Russia

Both states and businesses that consider migration from an economic point of view, in general perceive it pragmatically and understand their dependence on it; they feel the need to close the “skill level gap” which characterises the labour shortage, and often act together when making important decisions regulating migration flows. But the population of countries receiving migrants, including Russia, only indirectly feels the economic benefits of migration, fearing for their future, experiencing a crisis of confidence in state institutions and at the level of individual relationships. A high level of migrantophobia, albeit hidden, still remains.

So, according to the Moscow Bureau for Human Rights in Russia,<sup>52</sup> the coronavirus pandemic has led to a decrease in social activity of the population and reduced the number of open conflicts, including those on ethnic and religious grounds. The decrease in the level of xenophobia is largely due to the introduction of restrictions on public events, but intolerance has partly moved to the Internet. A slight decrease in xenophobic crimes is also recorded by other experts of the Russian civil society.<sup>53</sup>

Goodwill or rejection towards migrants in Russia can be assessed from two sides: on the part of Russians and on the part of the migrants themselves, who determine the attitude of Russians towards them. A comparison of these two indicators in 2020 showed that migrantophobia in Russia during the pandemic has retained a latent character, so-called “sleeping aggressiveness”.<sup>54</sup>

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<sup>52</sup>Proyavleniya agressivnoj ksenofobii i radikal'nogo nacionalizma v Rossii v yanvare – oktyabre 2020 goda [Manifestations of aggressive xenophobia and radical nationalism in Russia in January – October 2020]. *Moskovskoe byuro po pravam cheloveka [Moscow Bureau for Human Rights]*, 2020. URL: [http://vid-1.rian.ru/ig/pressmia/2020/Report\\_2020\\_Xenophobia.pdf](http://vid-1.rian.ru/ig/pressmia/2020/Report_2020_Xenophobia.pdf); <http://pravorf.org/index.php/smi-review>

<sup>53</sup>Ksenofobiya, svoboda sovesti i antiekstremizm v Rossii v 2020 godu (sbornik dokladov) [Xenophobia, freedom of conscience and anti-extremism in Russia in 2020 (collection of reports)]. M.: Centr “Sova”, 2021. URL: <https://www.сова-center.ru/files/books/pr21-text.pdf> (The Sova Center is recognized as a foreign agent under the Russian foreign agent law – Editor’s note).

<sup>54</sup>Lev Gudkov, Karina Pipiya. Parametry ksenofobii, rasizma i antisemitizma v sovremennoj Rossii [Parameters of xenophobia, racism and anti-Semitism in modern Russia] // *Vestnik obshchestvennogo mneniya [Public Opinion Bulletin]*. 2019. No 3–4 (127). URL: <https://www.levada.ru/cp/wp-content/uploads/2019/02/2-2018-new.pdf> (The Levada Center is recognized as a foreign agent under the Russian foreign agent law – Editor’s note).

Let us clarify this point using the example of migrants from Central Asia, whose presence in Russia raises sharp assessments and opinions. In 2020, two-thirds of Russians voiced a cool attitude towards migrants from Central Asia, and two-thirds of migrants from Central Asian countries said they'd experienced welcoming attitudes among Russians.

According to the Levada Center<sup>55</sup> (foreign agent), migrantophobia over the past 10 years has not fundamentally changed, in the sense that about 60% of Russian citizens consistently do not want to see immigrants from Central Asia or are only ready to see them stay temporarily. On the other hand, over the past decade, the number of those who are ready to see such migrants among their relatives, friends, neighbours, work colleagues and residents of Russia has grown by almost 10% (from 28% in 2010 to 39% in 2019 and 38% in 2020). Russians, according to the opinion of the migrants from Central Asia, interviewed in November-December 2020<sup>56</sup> are generally rather positive towards them. Thus, almost two-thirds (62%) of the respondents said they'd experienced a welcoming attitude among the local population (64% for migrants from Uzbekistan, 61% from Kyrgyzstan, 62% from Tajikistan), and a quarter (26%) said they experienced a neutral attitude (24% for migrants from Uzbekistan, 26% from Kyrgyzstan, 27% from Tajikistan). Only 1% of respondents said they had met with local hostility: including more women (2%) than men (1%) and more migrants from Uzbekistan (2.4%) than migrants from Tajikistan (1.7%) and Kyrgyzstan (0.3%).

Migrantophobia in Russia is unlikely to wane until a comprehensive migrant integration and adaptation system is created. This could soften many sharp corners and help overcome contradictions between the migrants, who mostly come from rural areas, and the urban culture of the Russian cities where they find themselves. This is an essential

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<sup>55</sup> Ksenofobiya i nacionalizm [Xenophobia and Nationalism]. Levada-Centr. September 23, 2020. URL: <https://www.levada.ru/2020/09/23/ksenofobiya-i-natsionalizm-2/>

<sup>56</sup> 900 citizens from Tajikistan, Kyrgyzstan, Uzbekistan from 18 to 60 years old, working at the time of the survey in Russia, were interviewed. The study was conducted within the framework of the Regional Project of the International Organization for Migration "Reducing the impact of the socio-economic consequences of the COVID-19 pandemic on migrants and communities in Central Asia and the Russian Federation" (2020–2021).

division that is often overlooked in favour of what may seem from first sight as more obvious cultural and religious factors setting migrants apart from local residents.

Migrants and Russians communicate through “glass walls,”<sup>57</sup> which does little to encourage mutual trust. Migrantophobia is like a smouldering fire that keeps burning out of sight, breaking out in flames every now and then.

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## Conclusion

Overall, the pandemic has cast migration as one of the top political concerns, while its outcomes for both the destination countries and the migrants have been quite controversial and varied.

In fact, the pandemic has exacerbated xenophobic and anti-immigrant sentiment in many destination countries, and caused a sharp fall in migration flows. At the same time, it has brought about a radical structural shift on the labour market, highlighting the extent to which destination countries depend on migrant workers. This in turn could incite many of these countries to review their migration policies.

The United States clearly stands out as a result of the intensity of the partisan divide over immigration, which could be attributable to the American elites’ total rejection of Donald Trump, as well as to the Democrats taking over the White House from the Republicans on January 20, 2021 and also the deep-running conceptual divide between Trump and the Democratic Party’s left wing. Joseph Biden accepted the main elements of the latter’s migration platform, at the very least by paying them lip service. Attempts to get the better of the situation by,

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<sup>57</sup>Dmitry Poletaev. From Mistrust to Solidarity or More Mistrust? Russia’s Migration Experience in the International Context. *Valdai Papers* No. 97. December 12, 2018. URL: <https://valdaiclub.com/a/valdai-papers/from-mistrust-to-solidarity/>

among other things, pretending that all problems are part of the legacy of Trump, appointing Vice President Kamala Harris to resolve the issue of illegal cross-border migration to the United States across the Mexican border and charging her with leading negotiations with a number of Central American countries in June 2021, did nothing to stabilise the situation with migration in the United States. The migration issue may return to the forefront of the political debate in the run-up to the 2022 elections, as the opponents of illegal migration are gaining traction in public opinion.

These trends, alongside the fragile Democratic majorities in Congress, the approaching midterms and Biden's personal views, throw into question his ability to deliver on his campaign promises on immigration, primarily those related to providing legal status to a huge number of undocumented noncitizens.

At the same time, as noted above, there was a sharp deficit of workers due to travel restrictions and with the labour market restructuring, the massive unemployment benefit payouts during the pandemic were a major lifeline for businesses, since they helped attract more migrants. In particular, this could affect the way many Republicans treat the migration issue during the 2022 election campaign.

The pandemic demonstrated the importance of immigration in terms of population growth and satisfying the demand for labour. Interestingly, this applies to both skilled and unskilled workers. In fact, as of March 2021 seven out of the 20 countries worst affected by COVID-19, namely the United States, Great Britain, France, Spain, Italy, Germany and the Czech Republic, relied heavily on immigrants for staffing their healthcare services. For example, in Great Britain immigrants accounted for 33% of doctors, and 22% of nurses. In the United States, the share of immigrant healthcare professionals stood at 16.4% totalling 2.8 million, including 28.2% of doctors and 15.3% of all medical nurses.<sup>58</sup> Australia,

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<sup>58</sup> Immigrant healthcare workers are critical in the fight against Covid-19. *New American Economy Research Fund*. April 9, 2020. URL: <https://research.newamericaneconomy.org/report/covid-19-immigrant-healthcare-workers/>



Austria, Belgium, Canada, Finland, the Czech Republic, Slovakia and a number of other countries have recently amended their migration laws to enable more foreign healthcare professional to enter their territory and get work.<sup>59</sup> One may hope that these numbers will bring about positive shifts not only in the way political elites approach the migration issue, but also in attitudes towards migration in the public opinion of the destination countries.

However, the prospect of migrants causing heightened tension in a number of destination countries should not be ruled out. The outlined growth of xenophobia and migrantophobia in the countries receiving migrants<sup>60</sup> at the beginning of the pandemic as a whole did not lead to a significant surge in intolerance, but there is no particular decline in it either. So, in 2020, there was an increase in right-wing extremism in Germany,<sup>61</sup> and in 2021 60% of US citizens expressed dissatisfaction with the steps of the new administration regarding the situation on the border with Mexico.<sup>62</sup>

In Russia, migrantophobia is unlikely to subside due to the fact that amid a deepening economic crisis and efforts to respond to challenges posed by the pandemic, migrants become easy targets for radical politicians and can serve as a lightning rod for easing social tension, should things get soured.

The pandemic-induced restrictions turned the previously hypothetical idea of closed borders into a reality. On the one hand, this had a positive effect in that for eighteen months migrants benefitted

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<sup>59</sup>The Impact of COVID-19 in the Migration Area in EU and OECD Countries. *EMN and OECD Umbrella Inform.* April 2021. P. 13. URL: <https://www.oecd.org/migration/mig/00-eu-emn-covid19-umbrella-inform-en.pdf>

<sup>60</sup>Dmitry Poletaev. Global Migrantophobia and Coronavirus. *The Valdai Discussion Club.* June 24, 2020. URL: <https://valdaiclub.com/a/highlights/global-migrantophobia-and-coronavirus/>

<sup>61</sup>Ol'ga Mishchenko. V FRG vyros uroven' politicheski motivirovannoj prestupnosti [In Germany, the level of politically motivated crime has increased] // *DW.* May 4, 2021. URL: <https://www.dw.com/ru/v-frg-rastet-uroven-politicheski-motivirovannoj-prestupnosti/a-57421183>

<sup>62</sup>Kendall Karson. Biden receives high marks on COVID-19, lags on immigration, guns // *ABC News.* March 28, 2021. URL: <https://abc7news.com/joe-biden-approval-covid-stimulus-border-crisis-gun-control/10454455/>

from a relatively liberal provisional migration framework. Of course, the softening, be it temporary, of migration regulations in these extreme circumstances should be viewed as a welcome development. On the other hand, we still lack comprehensive, adequately financed integration programmes for migrants or an institutional coalition with Russian NGOs on migration issues. Therefore, migrantophobia is likely to remain in Russia as a delayed risk.

Despite the decline in global migration in 2020, host countries around the world are waiting for the resumption of migration inflows, including through the already-formed informal channels – from the sea route from Africa through Lampedusa island<sup>63</sup> to the US-Mexican border.<sup>64</sup> It is often difficult to heal the disease of migrantophobia and the issue of final recovery is not on the agenda yet.

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<sup>63</sup> Mark Lowen. Lampedusa: Italy's gateway to Europe struggles with migrant influx // *BBC*. 13 May 2021. URL: <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-europe-57087818>

<sup>64</sup> Statement by Homeland Security Secretary Alejandro N. Mayorkas Regarding the Situation at the Southwest Border. March 16, 2021. URL: <https://www.dhs.gov/news/2021/03/16/statement-homeland-security-secretary-alejandro-n-mayorkas-regarding-situation>; Ksenia Loginova. Neradushnyj priem: v SSHA razgoraetsya migracionnyj krizis [An inhospitable welcome: US migration crisis flares up] // *Izvestiya*. April 5, 2021. URL: <https://iz.ru/1144920/kseniia-loginova/neradushnyi-priem-v-ssha-razgoraetsia-migratcionnyi-krizis>

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