



Coronavirus pandemic challenges migrants worldwide and in Russia

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Abstract

The paper deals with the situation of one of the most vulnerable social groups under COVID-19, namely migrants and refugees. The author classifies pandemic-related challenges faced by migrants into several groups: (1) economic, (2) medical, or sanitary-epidemiological, (3) socio-psychological, and (4) political. Special attention is paid to the situation in Russia, which largely coincides with what is happening in other countries with numerous numbers of migrants, and at the same time has its own specificity.

Keywords

coronavirus, migration, migrants, refugees, economic crisis

JEL codes: F01, F22, F66, I12, I14, I18, J23, J63

The link between the spread of infectious diseases and migration was established a long time ago. Diseases spread along trade routes, with advancing armies, prisoners of war, refugees. Since ancient times, quarantine has been the most effective way to counter the spread of epidemics. Venice, which was a trade crossroad, in the middle of the 14th century, during the plague epidemic, introduced quarantine measures for foreign ships arriving at the port of Venice at the legislative level: they were initially required to anchor for 40 days at the nearby island, which was called Lazzaretto. Actually, hence the origin of the word “quarantine” – from the Italian “quaranta – forty”.

The approach to understanding the link between migration and health is now more comprehensive. An important topic is the study of the impact of migration on the health of migrants themselves, both physical and emotional. With regard to epidemiological risks, it has been proven that not only the arrival of migrants from other countries carries epidemiological risks to the receiving countries, but also the presence of migrants in destination countries is often accompanied by infection with diseases that they subsequently bring to their countries and

communities. Often, this reverse flow is burdened with more serious consequences, because the countries of origin most often lack the experience, capacity and means to treat such diseases like HIV brought by their nationals from migration (Struin and Shubina 2015; Aleshkovsky et al. 2008; Kuznetsova et al. 2013; Mikhailova et al. 2018; Wickramage et al. 2018).

The World Health Organization has been insisting on an approach that is both humane and pragmatic, that the health of refugees and migrants must be an integral part of public health systems (WHO Regional Office for Europe 2018; WHO 2017).

The COVID-2019 epidemic and unprecedented containment measures have affected migration in the most radical way. Contrary to the well-established assertions that migration of population is a process of inertia and it is hardly possible to stop it by migration policy measures, it has been found that in the context of large-scale social experiment migration can still be stopped, at least for a while. The declaration of the coronavirus pandemic by the World Health Organization almost immediately led to restrictions on the movement of people across state borders imposed by many countries. Initially, it concerned those who came from countries affected by the epidemic: in some countries, movement across borders was blocked, elsewhere people committed to lockdown. Then, the consulates were closed and the issuance of visas was put on halt, transport links between the countries practically ceased. The joke said, coronavirus turned more effective in stopping migration than any wall Donald Trump could build.

Information from around the world suggests that migrants are one of the most vulnerable social groups, as in previous large-scale economic crises. However, this time the situation is aggravated by an epidemiological factor. Forced deprivation of jobs and earnings, coupled with restrictions on movement associated with lockdown, and in some cases with inability to follow reasonable anti-epidemic rules, puts them and their families to the brink of life and death.

The challenges faced by migrants in the context of the coronavirus pandemic can be grouped into several groups.

Economic challenges

The shutdown of production, the closure of trade enterprises, the freezing of construction sites — all this has led to the loss of income of a large part of the migrants employed in these fields. If local residents sent to forced lockdown were guaranteed preservation of at least some income, in the conditions of a sharp drop in employers' incomes foreign workers were laid off without any dismissal pay.

In India, millions of people who lost their jobs in cities because plants and factories were closed went to their villages with their families in order to survive. Sometimes it took several days on foot, and not everyone reached home... (The Guardian 2020). Tens of thousands of migrant workers from Cambodia, Myanmar and other countries were trapped in Thailand, where they worked in garment factories and in tourism. The enterprises closed because the supply of raw materials from China stopped, the tourist flow stopped, and migrants were left without work. At the same time, returning home was impossible due to the termination of transport links between the countries (Aljazeera 2020).

In the Gulf countries, millions of migrant workers from India, Bangladesh, Nepal, Pakistan are in forced lockdown, without wages and under threat of deportation — this new reality calls into question the existence of migrant families remaining in their homelands. In some cases, employers, for example in Saudi Arabia, by releasing local workers for paid

quarantine, insist that foreign workers continue to work (CAN 2020). But it is unlikely that this measure is far-sighted in the context of the epidemic.

There is no doubt that the pandemic will be followed by a deep and global economic crisis, which means a decline in people's living standards, reduced employment opportunities, social instability and... an increase in migration flows. Because people who are unable to find jobs in the crisis-affected economies of their countries will desperately seek to find employment in other, more prosperous countries. Not everyone will be able to do this legally. There is a risk of an increase in illegal, irregular migration in the world.

Medical, or sanitary-epidemiological challenges

Migrants, especially such categories as migrant workers, irregular migrants, forced migrants and refugees, have far less access to health care than local residents. In addition, their living conditions are often overcrowded and in poor sanitary conditions. This is particularly true of persons in camps for refugees and internally displaced persons. The stress of people living in refugee camps makes them more vulnerable to diseases, including infectious and viral diseases. The COVID-19 pandemic has given new impetus to the "Migration and health" topic. Clearly, in countries with large numbers of migrants and refugees, responses to the pandemic can only be effective if they include migrants and refugees.

All the quarantine measures that European countries are taking today may prove to be totally useless, given the presence of millions of refugees from Africa and Asia in Europe. Hundreds of thousands of people from Syria, Afghanistan, Pakistan, Libya, Somalia, Eritrea and many other countries live on the territory of the European Union in tent camps and are not covered by the system of medical monitoring. This is an extremely favourable environment for the spread of all pandemics, given the limited access of people to necessary medical care, overcrowding, poor hygiene and food.

In general, simple recommendations to counter the pandemic, such as frequent and thorough washing of hands or social distancing are simply impossible in conditions of a crowded living of forced migrants, whether they live in refugee camps in Greece or in camps for internally displaced persons in Syria (CBS 2020). However, according to the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees, there are about 70 million forced migrants in the world now, 26 million of them are refugees.

Not only forced migrants but also the so-called "voluntary" migrants, for example those who come to another country for employment, often live in such conditions of overcrowding and low sanitary and hygienic standards that their response to pandemic measures is simply unrealistic. The limited access of migrant workers to medical and sanitary prevention measures and care makes the spread of the pandemic virtually uncontrollable.

All UN organizations concerned with migration — IOM, UNHCR, WHO — draw the attention of governments and people to the fact that migrants and refugees in the context of the COVID-19 pandemic should not be excluded from the general population protection measures taken by the governments (OHCHR, IOM, UNHCR, WHO 2020), wisely pointing out that "if during this pandemic we leave behind the most vulnerable, we fail not only them, but all of us. COVID-19 is challenging us as a community, and we must answer as one" (WHO Regional Office for Europe 2020).

Social and psychological challenges

Migration is itself a destabilizing factor that can affect the mental health of the people involved (Davies et al. 2009). Uncertainty about the prospects of stay and work, separation from family, lifestyle changes, a new, not always friendly, social environment are “usual” stress factors for the labour migrant. In the period of the COVID-19 pandemic, fear of becoming ill and being left without medical care is added, together with general panic, fear of deportation, or vice versa, inability to return home because of closed borders. Loss of work means inability to send money home, which means that anxiety and responsibility for the family increases. In this situation, migrants are able to take desperate steps, while the possibility of social and psychological support from migrant associations and human rights organizations is limited by the conditions of forced distancing of people.

Political challenges

The surge of politicization of the migration topic is characteristic of all large-scale crises: migrants are often declared “scapegoats” and responsibility for other people’s sins is in fact imposed on them. The coronavirus crisis is no exception: migrants were accused of spreading the disease in a number of countries. Migrants from China were subject to stigmatization and xenophobia already at the very beginning of the pandemic.

The ban on the movement of people, of course, will be lifted once the pandemic is overcome. However, there is a high probability that migration rules will be tightened. It is possible that the COVID-2019 pandemic will be the starting point that will fundamentally change the migration policy of most countries. The positions of right-wing parties, which are characterized by anti-immigration rhetoric, are strengthening. The idea of global, concerted action on migration management focused in the Global Compact on Safe, Orderly and Legal Migration (United Nations 2018), signed by 152 countries only a year ago, could be buried by the coronavirus pandemic, which forced countries to close from one another with conditional “fences”.

Governments are already responding rather differently to the need to address the situation of foreign nationals present in their territory during the pandemic. Generally speaking, the current crisis, which required urgent action, was a test of Governments for adaptability to extraordinary situations.

The most positive example appears to be Portugal, which granted the status of “temporary citizenship” to all foreign nationals present in its territory who have previously applied for citizenship, residence permit or temporary asylum (CNN 2020). The aim is to ensure that foreign citizens have full access to the national health system during the coronavirus pandemic, thereby ensuring the health security of the Portuguese themselves. In Italy, all permissive documents held by migrants (residence permit, work permit, family reunification permit, study visa, etc.) which expire during the quarantine period, were automatically extended to 15 June, implying that by then the epidemiological situation would be normalized and administrative services would be operational as usual. On the other hand, some countries have not taken steps to return even their own nationals stranded in other countries, and some have explicitly urged their migrants not to return home.

It should not be overlooked that the well-being of millions of families in the countries of origin of migrants depend on remittances from abroad. Labour migration is sustainable — and in fact with no alternative! — part of the life strategy of many households in these coun-

tries. Closing borders during the epidemic and possible tightening of the entry regime after it deprives migrants of earnings. The desperate situation of people who lost their source of income could lead to social outbreaks in countries of origin. The aggravation of the internal political situation amid the economic crisis is a threat to the development of these States.

The situation in Russia largely coincides with what is happening in other countries with a large number of migrants, and at the same time has its own specificity. In an effort to counter the spread of infection, Russia, like other countries, has closed its borders to the movement of people... As a result, hundreds of migrants from other countries, primarily CIS countries, who sought to leave home, having lost their jobs, were stuck in Russia... Russia had to take hasty measures to evacuate its citizens, whom the pandemic caught in other countries...

The most acute problem is the regulation of the status of those migrant workers who remain in Russia and whose permits have expired, i.e. they are unwittingly illegal migrants. The Ministry of Internal Affairs of Russia estimates the number of legally working migrant workers in Russia at 2.5 million (Komsomolskaya Pravda 2020). Approximately the same number of migrants are employed unofficially. According to experts, up to 90% of migrant workers do not want to leave Russia and expect to wait out the crisis here. Since the vast majority of labour migrants in Russia are citizens of the CIS countries with whom Russia has strong historical and geopolitical bonds, making decisions on migrant workers who lost their job should be very balanced. To deport these people by force means to create an explosive situation in their countries of origin where there is no job for them. Uzbekistan and Tajikistan are already experiencing social stress because of the pandemic and closed borders, hundreds of thousands of citizens are deprived of the opportunity to go to Russia to work, as they do year after year in spring when demand in the labour market increases.

Many migrants continue to work under quarantine conditions, as they are employed in life-supporting industries such as housing and utility services, public transport and food delivery. Migrant work can rarely be done online, and not all of them are covered by “off time with preservation of wages”. At the same time, they have to pay a mandatory employment tax. Therefore, migrants who have lost their jobs in trade, entertainment or construction, find jobs where there is a demand for workers – courier services, improvement of the territories, agriculture.

The Russian migration authorities granted migrant workers from CIS countries in case of expiry of a patent or the period of authorized stay the right to extend them without leaving the territory of the Russian Federation, as well as to abolish for the time being the application of measures of administrative expulsion, deportation and readmission for violation of migration legislation. The validity period of visas, temporary residence permits and residence permits is automatically extended for 3 months. These and other measures aimed at regulating the stay of migrants in Russia during the pandemic are enshrined in a special order of the Ministry of Internal Affairs of 19.03.2020 (Ministry of Internal Affairs of Russia 2020).

The pandemic will come to an end. This unique social experiment to isolate people will end. The world will return to movement. But it will certainly not be the same as before. And most importantly, following the pandemic a serious economic crisis will inevitably come together with a reduction in the number of jobs, an increase in unemployment and a decline in income. And here again, as in the times of previous large-scale economic crises, but perhaps even more acute, there will be a discussion question about the place of migrants in the Russian economy. Does a country have the right to provide jobs to foreigners if millions of its own citizens are unemployed? Will local residents qualify for the jobs currently occupied by migrants? How will the Russian labour market, which has been in fact a regional market

for two decades, be able to re-shape taking into account new realities? How will the neighboring countries cope with the situation? Not only the prospects of economic development of Russia but the future of economic, political and geopolitical development of the entire region will depend on the answers to these questions.

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