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# К ВОПРОСУ О ДЕНЕЖНЫХ ПЕРЕВОДАХ ВЫХОДЦЕВ ИЗ ЦЕНТРАЛЬНОЙ АЗИИ В РОССИЮ В ПЕРИОД COVID-19 ПОД ПРИЗМОЙ НЕОКЛАССИЧЕСКОЙ ТЕОРИИ МИГРАЦИИ

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Коронавирус оказал решающее влияние на условия труда и жизни трудовых мигрантов в миграционном коридоре между государствами Центральной Азии и Российской Федерацией, который остается основным направлением трудовой миграции во всем макрорегионе. Согласно представлениям классических теорий миграции, миграционные потоки должны определяться в первую очередь вполне понятным монетарным фактором — различиями в возможностях и оплате труда -- между рынками труда развивающихся стран-доноро и развитых принимающих стран. И сформировавшийся дисбаланс, выражающийся именно в возможности трудовых мигрантов отправлять повторные денежные переводы родственникам на родину, между очень разными постсоветскими государствами — один из таких случаев. Однако, несмотря на резко возросшую уязвимость в сфере финансов и занятости, а также полную неопределенность относительно ближайшего будущего, среди трудовых мигрантов во время пика в апреле первой, но самой разрушительной волны распространения в России новой эпидемии СОVID-19 и, скорее всего, последующего отсутствия привлекательности иммиграции как таковой, мигранты все ме продолжали выбирать дальнейшую работу и жизьт там. Таким образом, все это ставит под сомнение концепцию, согласно которой важнейшим аргументом в пользу трудовой миграции является именно потенциальная возможность заработать больше денег за рубежом, поскольку некоторые другие аспекты и/или их комбинации также играют не меньшую роль.

Ключевые слова: экономическая уязвимость; денежные переводы; Центральная Азия; Россия; трудовая миграция; неоклассическая теория миграции.

**Для цитирования:** Рязанцев С. В., Рязанцев Н. С., Храмова М. Н. К вопросу о денежных переводах выходцев из Центральной Азии в Россию в период COVID-19 под призмой неоклассической теории миграции. Проблемы социальной гигиены, здравоохранения и истории медицины. 2025;33(4):680—686. DOI: http://dx.doi.org/10.32687/0869-866X-2025-33-4-680-686

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## ON THE ISSUE OF REMITTANCES BY EXPATRIATES FROM CENTRAL ASIA TO RUSSIA DURING COVID-19 PANDEMIC UNDER THE PRISM OF MIGRATION NEOCLASSICAL THEORY

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The coronavirus crucially impacted working and living conditions of labor migrant workers within migration corridor between Central Asian states and the Russia Federation. It remains prior destination for labor migration in this entire macro-region. According to concepts of classic migration theories, migration flows are to be primarily determined by quite clear monetary factor — differences in working opportunities and wages — between labor markets of developing countries as donor and developed countries as receiver. The formed imbalance manifesting exactly in possibility for labor migrants to send repeated remittances to relatives back home, between very diverse post-Soviet states is one of these cases. However, despite crucially increased vulnerability in sphere of finances and employment, as well as complete uncertainty concerning nearest future, among labor migrants during peak in April of the first one, but the most damaging wave of propagation of new COVID-19 epidemic in Russia and highly likely following lack of attractiveness in immigration as such, migrants did continue to opt for further work and life there. Therefore, all this calls into question concept that most important argument in favor of labor migration is very potential possibility to earn more money abroad because other aspects and/or their combination also play no less role.

K e y w o r d s: economic vulnerabilities; remittance; Central Asia; Russia; migrant worker; labor migration; neoclassical migration theory.

For citation: Ryazantsev S. V., Ryazantsev N. S., Khramova M. N. On the issue of remittances by expatriates from Central Asia to Russia during COVID-19 pandemic under the prism of migration neoclassical theory. *Problemi socialnoi gigieni, zdravookhranenia i istorii meditsini.* 2025;33(4):680–686 (In Russ.). DOI: http://dx.doi.org/10.32687/0869-866X-2025-33-4-680-686

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Conflict of interests. The authors declare absence of conflict of interests.

Acknowledgment. The study had no sponsor support.

Received 12.08.2024 Accepted 30.10.2024

#### Introduction

Labor migration in the migration corridor, once emerged and still ongoing between Central Asian coun-

tries and Russia, has been traditionally having a quite crucial social, economic, and demographic importance for all sending and hosting national economies, labor Здоровье и общество

markets, and societies of this entire post-Soviet macroregion. Year by year, these states continue to stay the main donors of labor migrants to Russia, and by the begging of COVID-19, among  $\approx 4.17$  million regular and  $\approx 2.5$  million irregular labor migrants, on the territory of Russia in total,  $\approx 76\%$  of these foreigners could turn out to be only the representatives of the countries of Central Asia [1, 2].

Concerning Russia, labor migration from Central Asian states has an enormous economic importance [3], as all international labor migrants produce about 8% of national GDP, while the workers from the initial Central Asian countries contribute over 65% of this economic effect in total [2]. Moreover, migrant workers from abroad allow to reduce the labor shortage in Russia, stimulate the development of some sectors and industries of the local economy [2], etc. In March, 2020, >514,000 of labor migrants in Russia were the natives of Uzbekistan, >276,000 of Tajikistan, >93,000 of Kyrgyzstan, >29,000 of Kazakhstan, and finally ≈1,500 of Turkmenistan [2], while most of these labor migrants were mainly considered as low-paid blue-collar workers, therefore, engaged in construction site, sales, manufacturing, agriculture works, and food service [2]

The situation is much more serious for the least developed countries (LDCs) of Central Asia. Traditionally, any work in Russia for labor migrants from Central Asia is a great or even the only opportunity to at least partly avoid poverty and improve living conditions for them and their relatives, namely via better employment and remittances [3]. In a year before the pandemic, for example, over 27% of national GDP of Kyrgyzstan and about 28% Tajikistan was based on all international remittance inflows to the countries, making these numbers one of the highest globally [4]. Not surprisingly, very often even small or irregular money transfers from abroad might be the only source of income for the whole local households of Middle Asian countries [3].

In this sense, labor migration between Central Asian LDCs and developed Russia is a good example for trying to apply the neoclassical theory of migration. Emigration from emerging regions to emerged onces has a clearly expressed economic nature, covered by low skill migration flows with earnings as the main motivation [5–7]. The theory declares, one of the reflections of financial benefits of emigration to new labor market is expectation of higher income (with a possibility of sending remittances as one of its manifestations) [6]. This happens against the backdrop of significant wage differentials and job opportunities. However, high financial dependance can be dangerous during international crises, including COVID-19. Thus, testing the strength of the theoretical basis.

Once pandemia occurred, Russia had to restrict the entry of foreign citizens into the state through banning regular avia connection during March 18 to May 1, 2020 [8], while all Central Asian republics were imposing the same measures [3]. As a result, regional mobility was declined sharply and just by early April 2020 had virtually disappeared at the momentum. Labour markets formed new shapes. In these new formed conditions

within Russia, so-called the first wave of the COVID-19 pandemia, lasted between March-June 2020 with the peak in April — despite the fact that the peak numbers of infected people due to the coronavirus had not yet been passed at that time — coupled with the strictest interstate anti-COVID measures in general and the lock-down in particular, did manage to become the most damaging for the Russian economy and society, especially for very vulnerable foreigners among it, who were fully depended on their opportunity to work in the hosting country and could not adopt new conditions immediately and rationally.

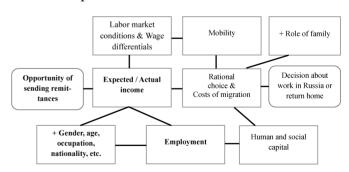
The paper is aimed at examining the behavior of labor migrants from Central Asian countries during the peak of the first wave of the COVID-19 pandemic and its correlation or discrepancy with the neoclassical theory of migration.

#### Theoretical framework

On micro level, the neoclassical theory of theory is based on individual economic principles and views migration as a rational choice of actors aimed at maximizing income (cost-benefit calculation) [6, 7]. On macrolevel, the main factor driving migration is wage differences, formed by supply and demand for labour, between pushing and pulling regions [5].

During COVID-19, labor migrants received new unexpected inputs for deciding whether their migration to Russia was still profitable rather staying in the country of origin. In Russia, migrants had to decide whether they should settle longer, accepting general uncertainty and higher risk. Nowadays, for example, one of the final manifestation of all these points for labor migrants is to have opportunities to send remittances back home [6].

The conceptual framework down below virtually illustrates extended constructs of epy neoclassical theory of migration in the applied context of labor migration from Central Asia to Russia during the first wave of the COVID-19 pandemic.



Basically, conducted research framework reflects how various structural, economic, and individual factors interact to influence two critical behavioral outcomes (in red borders), i.e., the ability to send remittances and the decision to stay in Russia or return home.

Occurred pandemia had a strong impact on the national economy of Russia and its society, especially in the most vulnerable groups, e.g., low-skilled workers, engages in informal sector [9]. Bankrupted enterprises, strict restrictions on movements, and general instability

resulted in job losses, lower wages, and a whole list of other following after crucial problems became only additional issues for ordinary foreigners, pushed to stay locked abroad in a new social and economic atmosphere. Moreover, most labor migrants are especially used to arriving for work in Russia in spring [9], and the introduction of self-isolation and the suspension of international connection came as a major shock for them [9]. This sudden economic downturn exacerbated social, economic, and financial vulnerabilities of labor migrants, disrupted prospects and expected before potential benefits of work abroad, which namely appeared in difficulties at finding sources for sending then common amounts of earned money as remittances back home.

#### **Materials and Methods**

Based on the research framework, there are four theory construct (highlighted in **bold**) used in the research. Beyond the decision of further stay in Russia and based on it opportunity of sending remittances (which represents the final result of work of labor migrants, i.e., deals with the construct of the rational choice), it is employment status (in particular, changes during COVID-19), and actual income. Also, it is also necessary to input additional variables (with + sign and in **bold**) not mentioned in the initial theory, but representing socio-demographic portrait of the entire actors of the theory.

This research is based on primarily and secondary data of the survey "The Impact of the COVID-19 Pandemic on Migrants and Remittances in Central Asia" [3]. The usage of data was possible only within the framework of that particular scientific study, as well as the consent was obtained from the copyright holders.

The survey took place in April 13–23, 2020, while a participation in the survey was completely on a free and voluntary basis. Due to the imposed lockdowns, the survey was fully held remotely, using the API solution from Google Forms on the official web site of FCTAS RAS. The sample of the sociological survey was based on a snowball method and namely distributed through the groups in then the most popular social media networks (VK, Facebook<sup>1</sup>, and WhatsApp<sup>4</sup>) [3], which are engaged in aiding for foreign labor migrants in Russia. Moreover, to avoid possible problems between respondents and the local police authorities, namely due to possible problems with their legal status in the country, the entire array of processed raw information was anonymized, therefore, it does not require any consent for

the distribution of the generalized results, and this approach refers to any secondary one.

After processing the survey data with crosschecking questions, 671 strings (respondents) were included in the final sample.

Among 12 presented variables in the survey, for our entire analysis, only 4 undependable variables from the dataset are required. It is additional to theoretical constructs, which deal with socio-demographic portrait of the sample. Among them are *gender*, *age*, *education*, and *citizenship*, representing the same name questions to the representatives, which were used to construct the logit model. Another undependable variable required for the modeling represents the employment change of the respondents (*employment\_change*), i.e., whether they lost job during COVID-19 or not. However, this particular construct should be considered as a theoretical construct.

Another theoretical constricts applicable for the chosen theoretical framework is *income\_change* (the way how income changes due to COVID-19, i.e., if it decreases or increased) and *return\_possibility* (if labor migrants wanted and even tried to leave Russia after the pandemics occurred).

And one dependent variable, which makes calculations of the possibility of sending remittances (*remittances\_possibility*) possible.

Regarding the assessment of *remittances\_possibility*, a logit model was chosen. The analysis was performed in R, using the *glm* package for the logit model, while the code would be available upon the request, as we found that the logit model is preferable to the probit model because the independent variables, apart from the age variable, are measured on a nominal scale, and their distribution is obviously different from normal.

The model specification should be considered as the following:

$$remittances\_possibility = F(Z), Z_i = \beta_0 + \sum_{j=1}^k \beta_j X_{ji} + \varepsilon_i, j = 1, ..., 8, i = 1, ..., n$$
 
$$F(Z) = \frac{1}{1 + e^{-Z}}$$

#### **Findings**

According to Table 1, the risk of losing a job and, as a consequence, income, is typical for both groups of respondents, with and without professional education. Many labor migrants in Russia did not work in their specialty, or worked below the level of professional competencies.

Table 2 indicates that the representatives of both genders have statistically equal chances of losing jobs.

Correlation between level of education and change in employment status

	Lost job or been put on unpaid leave	Worked at the same place or has been sent on paid leave	Total	
High school education or did not finish school Secondary vocational education and higher	n=99 n=312	n=64 n=196	n=163 (24%) n=508 (76%)	
Total	n=411 (61%)	n=260 (39%)	n=671 (100%)	

Table 1

 $<sup>^{\</sup>rm 1}$  In 2020, the products of the recently known Meta company were still legal in Russia.

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 $Table\ 2$  Correlation between gender and changes in employment status

	Lost job or been put on unpaid leave	Worked at the same place or has been sent on paid leave	Total
Females Males	n=158 n=253	n=106 n=154	n=264 (39%) n=407 (61%)
Total	n=411 (61%)	n=260 (39%)	n=671 (100%)

Result for *income\_change* in Table 3 show, 17% of labor migrants did not experience changes in income, or it even increased. For 26%, income decreased (despite maintaining previous positions). This is due to self-isolation and sending some employees on paid leave, employers, as a rule, only retain basic salaries, while additional payments may not be paid.

Table 4 illustrates for *return\_possibility* that 66% of migrants did not plan to leave Russia, regardless of the availability of work, of which 55% had lost their jobs but do not want to leave.

These values indicate, rather, the strategies of migrants who link their future with Russia. Partly, migrants simply couldn't return to homelands (with close state air routes) at the momentum. And only some migrants realized, returning to homelands would not help solve labor and financial problems. In crisis, when the demand for labor decreases and households choose a strategy aimed at saving financial resources (purchasing power of households falls), migrants are unlikely to be able to find work in home countries, therefore, staying in Russia was often preferable. In the event of even a partial lifting of restrictive measures, they have a chance to return to their previous job or find a new.

80% of migrants who lost jobs would not be able to transfer money to their home country by May, 2020. This suggests that the overwhelming majority of migrants did not have savings and almost their entire monthly income goes to current consumption and helping relatives in their country of origin. <10% of respondents who lost their jobs would not be able to transfer at least part of the usual amount.

Despite the fact that 40% worked at previous place of work or were on paid leave, 66% of them weren't able to send remittances. This is due to a drop in income and the need to revise the spending structure. Uncertainty about the exit from restrictive measures forces migrants with income to look towards saving money for current

 $Table \ 3$  Correlation between employment status and changes of income

	Income de- clined	Income had remained unchanged or increased	Total
Lost job or been put on un- paid leave Worked at the same place or	n=394	n=17	n=411 (61%)
has been sent on paid leave	n=163	n=97	n=260 (39%)
Total	n=557 (83%)	n=114 (17%)	n=671 (100%)

Table 4
Correlation between employment status and possibility of returning to the country of origin

	Wanted to leave Russia, but it did not manage to do it	Did not want to leave Rus- sia	Total
Lost job or been put on un- paid leave Worked at the same place or	n=169	n=242	n=411 (61%)
has been sent on paid leave	n=62	n=198	n=260 (39%)
Total	n=231 (34%)	n=440 (66%)	n=671 (100%)

needs (until June 15, 2020, migrants got the right to work without labor permits) [2, 3].

Based on Table 6, the proportion of correctly predicted cases is 80.7%. Pseudo-R-squared=0.12. Logarithm of likelihood = -279.47. X² (with 8 degrees of freedom) = 76.3, p-value=0.00. BIC=617.28. In other words, the statistics indicate a high quality of the model and the presence of statistically significant variables in it. High z-statistics was obtained for age, education, citizenship 1, and employment change.

The (-) sign in *gender* indicates, males are more likely to seek opportunities to send money back home (with all other things being equal). Obviously, as men who are labor migrants, in their home countries usually have families with relatives, who need financial support.

The (-) sign in *education* indicates that migrants with a higher level of education have a higher chance of making money transfers, i.e., the risk of being unable to transfer is reduced. This is explained by the fact that among migrants with a high level of education, a greater proportion of those who, as a result of restrictive measures in the economy, have not lost their jobs and, as a re-

Table 5
Correlation between employment status and possibility of sending remittances

	Did not have opportunity to send re- mittances	Had possibility to transfer at least part of common amount	Total
Lost job or been put on un- paid leave Worked at the same place or	n=371	n=40	n=411 (61%)
has been sent on paid leave	n=171	n=89	n=260 (39%)
Total	n=542 (80%)	n=129 (20%)	n=671 (100%)

Table 6
Results of model estimation using the maximum likelihood method

	Coefficient	Standard error	z-statistic
Constant Gender Age Education citizenship citizenship citizenship citizenship	(+)0,841329 (-)0,331973 (-)0,0037417 (-)0,441167 (+)0,862866 (+)0,221165 (+)0,263274 (-)0,600591	(+)0,570292 (+)0,225675 (+)0,0115636 (+)0,266624 (+)0,29501 (+)0,363447 (+)0,395017 (+)0,926446	(+)1,4753 (-)1,4710 (-)0,3236 (-)1,6546 (+)2,9249 (+)0,6085 (+)0,6665 (-)0,6483
employment_change	(+)1,53909	(+)0,220342	(+)6,9850

sult, have reserves to help their relatives in the country of origin. In other words, the representatives with higher skills were engaged in sectors and occupations which were more suitable for the conditions of crisis and remote work.

Employment\_change by the (+) sign in the model and the high value of the z-statistic shows a completely expected effect. Losing a job or being on unpaid leave significantly increases risks of not being able to send remittances.

A (+) sign and a high z-statistic value in *citizenship*<sub>1</sub> indicate that for labor migrants from this entire country, the probability of not sending remittances is significantly higher in comparison to others, i.e., Tajiks turned out to be the most vulnerable in terms of income loss. Among responded to this question n=239 Tajik migrants, before COVID-19, 75% were engaged in construction (n=100, 42%), cafes (n=53, 22%), and trade (n=31, 13%). Only a small number of lost job Tajik migrants were employed in other services, education, and manufacturing.

#### **Discussions**

The pandemic crisis has created unique conditions for analyzing migration behavior in a situation of sharp changes in economic parameters, which allows us to reevaluate the sustainability of traditional theoretical constructs.

In Russian, at the peak of the first wave of COVID-19, most labor migrants had been left without any work or even opportunity to return to the country of origin, literally turning them stuck between state borders in very bad social and economic conditions and new vulnerabilities. Unfortunately, very often, this left foreigners without any means of subsistence, sources of income, and even basic possibility to pay for accommodation and daily food, let alone the ability to send remittances to the relatives, for which money were needed no less, and sometimes even more. These shifts, caused by the new reality with the coronavirus infection, had to crucially reduce the general labor and economic attractiveness of temporary migration to Russia among Central Asian labor migrants, making them focus on the states, which offered better labor conditions. and, accordingly, calling into question the neoclassical theory of migration, which aims to explain labor migration as a search for a new place of life and work with better prospects of potential income in comparison to the country of emigration, calling into question the neoclassical theory of migration, which aims to explain labor migration as a search for a new place of life and work with better prospects of potential income in comparison to the country of emigration [3].

In fact, Central Asian labor migrants come to Russia as differences in wage between jurisdictions is the main incentive, and, even during the crisis, despite the rise in unemployment in Russia, even low-paid work in Russia remained more profitable than employment, limited, or even a total unemployment (especially among the youth) in the countries of origin or instant migration anywhere without preparation. This is very clearly from

the surveys of returning migrants, as three out of five Central Asians returnees turned unemployed if they return (especially in Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan) [10, 3], and especially among working age groups [10, 3].

In other words, during the first months of COVID-19, many migrants remained in Russia in the hope of the following economic recovery rather than immediately returning to their home countries, which confirms the theoretical hypothesis that migration is a long-term economic investment, what says the theory [3]. Additionally, a potential returning home [even if labor migrants could do this quite complicated cross border movement] imposed new expenses on return tickets, breaking rental contracts for housing or rental taxi cars, refunding spending for the recruiting agency (or even employer), etc.

Concerning particular numbers, the survey and model showed that COVID-19 has had a significant impact on employment and income of labor migrants. 66% of them lost jobs or were furloughed, and 84% experienced a reduction in their income. Despite these shocks, 66% of migrants decided to stay in Russia, highlighting their dependence on wage differentials between Russia and their home countries, a key tenet of neoclassical theory. This behavior is consistent with the theory's emphasis on long-term economic calculations, even in the face of short-term crises. However, the high percentage of migrants who stayed despite job losses could suggest on non-monetary factors, e.g., social networks with the other representatives from the countries of origin and diasporas.

The theory suggests that labor force moves in response to market demand [5]. And under the peak of the first pandemic lockdown in Russia, the national economy did slow and demand for any labor fell sharply, especially in the informal sector, where employers were not formally bound in any way by labor obligations to foreigners, making them the most vulnerable social group in the country (in the context of the pandemic) [9]. There were massive layoffs in construction site, services, and transportation, crucially employed with labor migrants from Central Asian and especially by the representatives from Tajikistan, which turned out to be the most damaged with the occurred epidemiological situation.

However, social and labor mobility in Russia took place, as rapid development of new and quite big sectors with then a huge potential of upcoming logarithmic growth, e.g., delivery services (as literally everyone was pushed to order goods at home), managed to provide labor migrants, namely whose who lost jobs or was only to come in Russia, with some work [3] or interest towards house moving into to this location. The others could opt for new or another work in the informal sector. As a result, this partly allowed many labor migrants in absolute numbers to get new job, therefore, recover at least part of their previous level of income. Again, with all the ensuing circumstances, including an opportunity to send remittances. This also demonstrates rational behavior of labor migrants which is based on their eco-

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nomic calculations, looking at the current situation from a rational point of view, as the theory suggests.

At the same time, the neoclassical theory of migration suggests that migrants make decisions not only based on their own needs, but also considering the wellbeing of their families [6]. However, even during the lockdown, many migrants sought to cut their daily expenses abroad as much as possible to maintain the ability to send money to the homelands, at least something (even whether these sums are dramatically lower in comparison to what they used to send before the pandemic). In the context of Central Asia, family, relatives, and diaspora play a special role in making a wide range of life decisions. However, it is difficult to qualitatively evaluate this relationship.

In case when foreign workers lost job and it was impossible to send remittances to the countries of origin, most of labor migrants considered that the difficulties with work abroad highly likely would be short-term only, so with a further search for a new job and/or stabilization of the situation in Russia, they would sooner or later be able to find new sources of livelihood. This is much more reasonable for labor migrants in the long term, therefore, fits the neoclassical theory of migration in the context of maximalization of wages and higher expectations concerning expected income [6]. However, at the moment, labor migrants violated all reasonable frameworks of theory and even basic rationality, under the pressure of social obligations, looked for ways (even were taking loans) to send money transfers that the family relies on.

Also, the neoclassical migration theory assumes the complete absence of institutional and administrative barriers (e.g., closed borders, visa restrictions, systems of quotas, and other artificial limitations on movements between labor markets), positing that migration flows with a motive for work abroad have to occur under conditions of free movement of labor force between states and labor markets on a global scale, regionally, and especially within the entire country of immigration. And it not only closed international flights, but also special regional or national systems with personal QR-codes.

In the case of Russia, these permissions could be issued only by the entire employers [3], what was quite a tricky problem for the workers in the informal sector, taking into account that ≈50% of Central Asian migrants stay in the informal sector [10], while ≈80% of both legal and illegal labor migrants generally do not have any signed contracts with their employers [3]. In general, this administrative measure was dangerous for any migrant, as breaking the law involved high fees, problems with migration police, etc. Ultimately, this increased the risk of contracting COVID-19. However, migrants were forced to consciously take higher risks to get some income.

#### Conclusion

It can be claimed that the effectiveness of the neoclassical theory of migration in this context has both strengths and limitations, as it does explain the economic aspects of migration but fails to account for the social, institutional, and political factors that played a significant role during the pandemic. In other words, the contemporary migration patterns and life are much more complex, as they used to be in the 1960–90ths, when the basics and some extended aspects the theory were established.

At the same, it was COVID-19 which became a significant external factor that changed the cost-benefit balance of migration for labor migrants and the principles of rational behavior, both in relation to Russia and in general. And the final decision and motives for migrants to move from or to Russia depend largely on their social status, level of education, the general expectation that the effects of the lockdowns, as well as social and economic problems were highly likely to be only temporary and with no other alternative options available for as an odd.

Taking into account everything mentioned above, state authorities and agencies of both sending and receiving states must pay attention to building resilient systems that can quickly respond to crisis situations, like COVID-19. Implementing these recommendations might reduce the vulnerability of labor migrants and ensure a more sustainable model of labor migration in the region, the well-being of labor migrants, their families, and national economies that depend either on receiving remittances from migrant workers abroad or directly on their employment in the host country. Particular attention should be paid to the creation of transparent mechanisms for regulating migration flows that are consistent with the principles of market economy and rational choice that underlie the neoclassical approach. These measures will strengthen economic incentives for legal migration, increase the efficiency of labor resource allocation, reduce the risks associated with migration processes, and optimize the benefits for both parties, again, including migrants themselves.

#### ЛИТЕРАТУРА

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Поступила 12.08.2024 Принята в печать 30.10.2024

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