

BOOK REVIEW

Elena Borisova. *Paradoxes of Migration in Tajikistan. Locating the Good Life*. [Economic Exposures in Asia.] UCL Press, London 2024. xviii, 244 pp. Ill. £50.00. (Paper: £30.00; Open Access.)

Elena Borisova's *Paradoxes of Migration in Tajikistan* is the first ethnographic monograph on migration in Tajikistan. Not only is the book a valuable contribution to the literature on migration in the post-Soviet space, but it is a reminder of the value of ethnography, where the experiences in the field largely shape the research as well. While Zoom and Teams have made it possible to speak with people around the world remotely, the book stresses the importance of travelling nevertheless – because the knowledge that this type of ethnography yields is impossible to gain without the personal encounters that substantial time spent in the field bring.

Based on rich ethnographic data from ten months of fieldwork in the Sughd region of Tajikistan, two months in St Petersburg, Russia (2017–2018), and two additional weeks in Tajikistan in January 2019, Borisova explores how people in Tajikistan go about solving the paradox of having to go to Russia for work in order to fulfil their life projects. At the same time, these travels to Russia constitute a great challenge to those very same projects.

Although some years have passed since the data collection, the introduction and conclusion provide contextual updates showing that, despite the war in Ukraine and the risks of Tajiks with Russian citizenship being mobilized and sent to the front, significant numbers of Tajiks are working in Russia and even taking up Russian citizenship. In 2022, Borisova reports, 174,000 Tajiks became Russian citizens; almost 87,000 more did so in the first half of 2023.

In Tajikistan, the author stayed with local families, and it is these people, their experiences, and their reflections – along with the reflections of the author herself – that we encounter in the book. While we meet several interlocutors, we particularly get to know a family with whom Borisova lived for a number of months during her stay. The conversations with her hosts bring us closer to everyday life in Tajikistan, the way in which people “craft themselves” as good people, and how this crafting of the self is intertwined with the country's Soviet past as well as the present, where migration to Russia is common.

The book consists of five chapters – all introduced with well-written and personal “interludes”. The introductory chapter gives the reader important background knowledge regarding migration from Tajikistan since the fall of the Soviet Union and the Russian migration regime, making the book accessible to people without such pre-existing background knowledge.

In migration literature, Tajikistan is known as one of the most remittance-dependent countries in the world, with remittances amounting to around fifty per cent of GDP. It is also one of the Central Asian countries providing the Russian Federation with necessary labour. While previous studies have focused on policies and conditions for these migrants in Russia, this book provides the Tajiks' views on emigrating from "home" and how life in contemporary Tajikistan is intertwined with migration to Russia.

Migration to Russia has become such a common choice that it has a significant impact on the lives of those staying put in Tajikistan and, indeed, the whole of Tajik society. Migration to Russia has become central to people's quest for modernity and the good life, and an important component not only in constructing their houses and paying for their family members' weddings – with money earned abroad – but also in constructing themselves as responsible and good people. The latter point comprises the major paradox that Borisova has identified: "One must go to Russia to become recognised as a good person by one's community, while at the same time going to Russia can undermine the foundations of one's personhood" (p. 5).

Thus, the "positive effects" of migration are connected not only to material gains, but also to personal development and the possibility of being "a good person", because the income earned abroad makes it feasible to comply with cultural expectations at home – for instance, throwing a decent wedding for one's children, fulfilling all the cultural obligations regarding presents and dowry. The author, however, also addresses the drawbacks of migration – which her interlocutors point to as being "the realm of morality, which suffers" (p. 75). This is perhaps best illustrated in Chapter Four, "Ambivalences of Care", where we learn how migration to Russia is challenging cultural expectations of caring for your parents – in particular when they get old, and how providing for them financially from abroad cannot fully replace the day-to-day attention expected in Tajikistan. It is thus not only about care as such, it is about "care as performance" (p. 160) – taking your elderly father to the mosque – for everyone to see how much you care for him.

The Soviet Union brought modernization and industrialization to Tajikistan, and when the Soviet Union collapsed so did industries and the "modernity" they brought with them. Borisova's interlocutors remember Soviet times with a degree of nostalgia for the possibilities they had back then in terms of mobility within the Soviet Union as well as employment in Tajikistan. "If it had not been for Russia, only God knows what would have become of this place!" (p. 75) was a phrase the author heard frequently when she attempted to start a conversation about migration – a paradoxical statement given the bureaucratic hurdles and sometimes outright xenophobia awaiting migrants from Central Asia in Russia.

The book also sheds light on how the Tajik state – although dependent on remittances – implements legislation in order to limit people's debts and economic struggles, and thereby the necessity to leave the country for work. The law "On regulations of traditions, celebrations and customs in the Republic of Tajikistan" prohibited traditional grandiose weddings and prescribed the form and content of this and other celebrations. Borisova describes how the law, rather than assisting its population in leading more "modern" and economically sustainable lives, complicates their lives when they are forced to abide by the legislation and circumvent it in order to comply with cultural

customs and the expectations of their friends, and how some even lose their income as a consequence of a drop in demand for wedding entertainment services. This is not the only legal paradox the book points to. In the last chapter, “Chasing the Red Passport”, the author shows how Russia’s increasingly complicated migration regime combined with relatively liberal citizenship policies makes citizenship the solution for securing access to the Russian labour market, and how the different paths to Russian citizenship are common knowledge among her interlocutors.

A praiseworthy aspect of the book is Borisova’s ability to engage fruitfully with her positionality as a researcher – for instance, when she reflects upon how she becomes part of her male host’s effort to craft himself as a modern or a “cultured man”; “having an educated Russian speaker with a cosmopolitan outlook in his home perfectly fitted his project of self-cultivation” (p. 93), because “every educated man must speak Russian” (p. 95). Throughout the book, Borisova pays attention to the words of her interlocutors and thus – learning about the content of these words in Russian and Tajik and what they express – we come closer to an understanding of how the interlocutors perceive of themselves and their surroundings. Borisova’s ability to see and reflect upon how her interlocutors shape her research and perhaps even adjust the research agenda enriches the book.

Paradoxes of Migration in Tajikistan is relevant far beyond the field of migration studies. We are all grappling with locating the good life wherever we are currently situated or in our plans for professional or other relocations. The book, as I see it, is also about how we are embedded in national and social cultural contexts that shape our expectations towards one another and how we go about our life projects. In this respect, the book leaves you wondering to what extent Tajiks’ views of Russia have been altered since Russia’s full-scale invasion of Ukraine, and what future trajectories await Tajikistan and its people.

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