

Tajikistan: a chronic stagnation

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Since gaining its independence Tajikistan has faced severe political, economic and social problems. The last several months has seen a clear increase in their intensity. This is in part caused by the deteriorating economic situation in Russia and the significant fall of remittances from the Tajik labour migrants in Russia, as well as by President Emomali Rahmon's rising authoritarianism. Despite this intensification, qualitatively speaking Tajikistan's problems have been unchanged for years. Besides the state's structural weakness, the main cause is the ongoing neo-colonial dependence on Russia, which effectively limits Dushanbe's room for political manoeuvre and keep Tajikistan in Russia's sphere of control. This dependence on the one hand protects the country from collapsing, but on the other it precludes the development of the state, resulting in Tajikistan's enduring stagnation. Similar processes also take place in other countries of post-Soviet Central Asia. However, in the case of Tajikistan the dependence and stagnation it causes are the strongest and their mechanisms most easily observed.

Causes of the dependence

Phenomena such as Tajikistan's chronic weakness, the constant lack of prospects for the state's development as well as significant, historically-based, unbroken ties with Russia, are all interlinked and have a decisive influence on the situation in the country. The intensity, character and dynamics of Tajikistan's dependence on Russia, as well as the lack of alternatives to it, allow the situation to be described as neo-colonial, a term which is key in analysing the processes taking place in Tajikistan.

Tajikistan's weakness is the primary factor which forces the country to be dependent on external assistance. Tajikistan is the poorest country of the former USSR, with significant social problems, an undeveloped economy, authoritarian government and advanced civilizational regression. Ways in which Tajikistan's weakness expresses itself in the political dimension in are:

the ineffectiveness of the state institutions and their level of corruption¹, the political instability of the state², simultaneously combined with the authoritarianism of the government. The state apparatus is dysfunctional – its various institutions, rather than perform the tasks which they were established to implement, constitute elements of a corruption system³; this results in

¹ Tajikistan ranked 136th from the 162 countries reviewed in the "Corruption Perceptions Index 2015". Corruption has a systemic character and is present not only in relations between the citizens and the state, but also constitutes an important element of the political system as such.

² This is visible, for example, in the cyclically occurring violence. Examples of that are the clashes in Khorug in 2012 between the central government forces and the informal local Pamiri leaders, and the skirmishes between the government forces and the former deputy minister of defence in September 2015. More in: <http://www.osw.waw.pl/pl/publikacje/analizy/2015-09-09/tadzyki-stan-wiceminister-obrony-do-odstrzalu>

³ For example, the role of the Tajik state structures in the drug smuggling from Afghanistan – Tajikistan is an important smuggling route for Afghan heroin sold on to the Russian market. The revenues of Tajik elite from this criminal activity may reach as much as several billion US dollars annually; <http://www.state.gov/j/inl/rls/nrcrpt/2014/vol1/223077.htm>

the state's far-reaching political ineffectiveness. Reforms aimed at genuine improvement have not been attempted in the country. All of the above, combined with the scale of the challenges that Tajikistan is facing, mean that Dushanbe is forced to seek external political support in order to secure the durability of its rule.

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The economic situation of Tajikistan does not allow the state to function independently. Tajikistan's economy is small and undeveloped⁴. The economy's frailty leads to a pauperisation of society, especially in rural areas – about 42% of Tajikistan's population lives below the poverty line⁵. The lack of a drive towards modernisation, combined with an absence of energy resources (the export of which are the basis for the revenue of the region's wealthier states – above all Kazakhstan), result in Tajikistan being unable to be economically independent, and therefore in need of external support also in this regard. The state apparatus receives assistance of this kind from the international financial institutions and various states (above all China), which provide financing for particular projects and institutions. For society, the presence of Tajik labour migrants in Russia provide this support, in the form of remittances, which are the main source of income for society. Due to Tajikistan's rapid demographic growth (between 2000 and 2014 country's population increased by 2.1 million people – 35%), labour migration

also plays an important socio-political role, as it allows social tensions to be neutralised, which could otherwise be potentially threatening for president Rahmon's rule.

Tajikistan's chronic weakness is organically linked to its dependence on its former metropole – Moscow. This dependence has a constant and unbroken character, although its intensity has periodically weakened. Tajikistan in its current form (borders, political institutions, etc.) is a result of Soviet policy in the region, and while being part of the USSR, the local communist authorities were fully dependent on Moscow's political will. After gaining independence, the country has witnessed a bloody civil war (1992–1997) between the government in Dushanbe⁶ and the United Tajik Opposition⁷, which resulted in 100,000 death and 1.2 million refugees. During the civil war, Russia acted as the main arbiter between the competing clans, influenced the course of the conflict through its military presence (Russian troops fought on the government's side), and ultimately became the guarantor of the peace agreements. After the war the situation in the country remained unstable, with the central government being unable to effectively control the entire territory of the state. This resulted in further political dependence on Russian support. After the 9/11 terrorist attacks and military operation in Afghanistan, Dushanbe opened up to cooperation with the West (for example western aid and military presence), which allowed it to reduce, but not eliminate, the dependence on Russia in this aspect, and to force Moscow to make several concessions (for example the withdrawal of the Russian border guards from the border with Afghanistan in 2005). Due to the weakness of the state, Dushanbe's attempts to balance the influence of the various players did not bring a durable result and, along with the decrease

⁴ In 2014 GDP stood at US \$ 9.24 billion (US \$ 1,114 *per capita*), while the main branches of the economy included agriculture (23.46% of GDP) and trade (14.37% of GDP). World Bank and Tajik Statistical Agency data, available at: <http://www.worldbank.org/en/country/tajikistan> and <http://www.stat.tj/ru/macroeconomic-indicators/>

⁵ http://hdr.undp.org/sites/default/files/tajikistan_2013.pdf

⁶ Who represented the Leninabad and Kulob clans, which originated from the western, more developed parts of the country.

⁷ A union of Islamic organisations and democratic forces, originating mainly from Gharm and to a lesser extent Badakhshan – the eastern and less developed parts of the country.

of western interest in the region (the end of the ISAF mission in Afghanistan), Russia has returned to the role of Dushanbe's unquestioned political patron.

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Due to the structural and chronic character of Tajikistan's weakness, as well as its geographic and historic settings, there are no alternatives to the state's current political, social and economic model, including the dependence on Moscow which it creates. It is also impossible to change the patron – China, the West, and regional powers such as Iran or India, despite their presence in Tajikistan, are neither interested nor capable of playing the role that Russia is playing. Additionally, due to the conviction established by the civil war, that the Russian support is necessary for the country's leader, Rahmon's successors will most probably not only make no attempt to limit the dependence on Russia – they are more likely to actively seek out its acceptance.

The mechanisms of neo-colonialism in Tajikistan

Tajikistan's dependence on Russia, and to a lesser extent China, is visible in the political, economic and social planes. The most vivid and well-known example of this multidimensional dependence is the presence of Tajik labour migrants in Russia. At the same time, dependence from the metropolises is not followed by an impulse for Tajikistan's development and modernisation generated by the above mentioned actors. It is in the interest of the old and new metropolises for Tajikistan to remain in its

current state. Beijing is interested in stability in its proximity and the construction of transport corridors in Tajikistan. That does require support for Tajik statehood, yet the country's modernisation and transformation are not necessary conditions. Moscow desires to retain its sphere of influence in Central Asia, and thus to keep Tajikistan weak enough to prevent Dushanbe from having alternatives to Russia, yet strong sufficiently not to collapse under the growing, chronic internal problems.

In the political and security dimensions, the mechanisms of Moscow's neo-colonial policy are aimed above all at conserving Dushanbe's dependence, limiting its space for political manoeuvre, and thus making it necessary to satisfy Russian demands. Russia exploits the issues of stability and security in this regard, usually through negative stimuli – the threat of destabilisation of the country were Dushanbe to act against Russian interests. The instruments of executing this threat – aside for the presence of Tajik labour migrants in Russia (which is key to country's stability) include Moscow's ability to support the regime's internal⁸ and external⁹ opponents, as well as its military presence. Russian forces have been present in Tajikistan since the beginning of the state's existence – units of the 201st Russian military base (up-to 7,000 strong) are stationed in the west and south of the country (Qurghonteppa and Dushanbe). Furthermore, Moscow utilises international organisations to institutionalise its influence, for example the Russia-dominated Collective Security Treaty Organisation (CSTO) which, while formally being a military alliance, allows Mos-

⁸ For example, the support for the Islamic Renaissance Party of Tajikistan in the form of allowing its leader Mu-hiddin Kabiri to campaign amongst the Tajik labour migrants in Russia.

⁹ For example, military aid for Kyrgyzstan which is engaged in a border conflict with Tajikistan. In 2012 Moscow decided to transfer military equipment to Tajikistan and Kyrgyzstan, officially to bolster their defence capabilities in the context of threats stemming from Afghanistan. Simultaneously, Kyrgyzstan, which does not border Afghanistan, is to receive aid valued at US \$ 1.1 billion, against Tajikistan's US \$ 200 million.

cow to control Tajikistan in the security sphere (above all in the geopolitical dimension – the lack of a non-Russian military presence)¹⁰.

One characteristic notion is that Tajikistan's dependence on Russia is only minimally limited by the dynamically growing Chinese economic engagement in this country. Paradoxically, the latter does not run counter to Russia's interests, and is complementary to them in certain aspects. While Moscow possesses a wide array of political instruments aimed at leveraging Dushanbe, its economic offer is significantly smaller and is concentrated mainly on the issue of labour migrants. Beyond that, Tajikistan is partially dependent on Russia in the energy sector – almost all oil-based products and fuels are imported from Russia, which has exploited the export duties on them as a tool of leverage¹¹.

The Chinese offer, while also resulting in Tajikistan's dependency, is based above all on positive stimuli for cooperation, mainly loans and investments. Those are usually directed at infrastructural projects (mainly transport infrastructure) and their amount during the period between 2014 and 2017 will equal US \$ 6 billion¹². They are an important source of income for the state (yet due to dysfunctional redistribution, not for society), and enable the realisation of necessary investments which, without the Chinese assistance, Dushanbe would not be able to complete. This however, does not directly threaten Moscow's interests – Beijing acknowledges Tajikistan as a part of the Russian sphere of influence, while the Chinese economic engagement as such is not a rival to that of Russia. Due to the lack of significant Russian economic engagement in the country, it rather fills the niche left by Russia.

In the social, but also political and economic dimensions, the chief mechanism of Tajikistan's dependence on Russia is the mass labour migration to Russia (862,000 people as of January 2016)¹³. For a significant part of society the basic form of income is either work in Russia or remittances from the migrants. These latter in 2014 amounted to US \$ 3.83 billion¹⁴, and compared with country's GDP were equal to about 41% of its size (which is the highest coefficient globally).

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For Dushanbe the massive scale of labour migration to Russia is on one hand a stabilising factor – it constitutes the main source of income for society and alleviates social tensions. However, it causes a far-reaching political and economic dependence on Russia. Due to the migration, the authorities are not forced to deal with the problem of providing society with a means of income (which, due to country's economic weakness, they are not capable of doing domestically), and in this way they simultaneously dispose themselves of the most active individuals from the country and thereby neutralise the threats to the regime's stability stemming from society. Moscow, aware of the weight that the issue holds for Dushanbe, has played the migration card multiple times in its relations with Tajikistan, both through negative (mass raids and deportations of illegal migrants)¹⁵ and positive stimuli (facilitations for the labour migrants from Tajikistan)¹⁶.

¹⁰ Further in: <http://www.osw.waw.pl/en/publikacje/osw-studies/2014-10-28/hostages-to-moscow-clients-beijing-security-central-asia-role-west>

¹¹ <http://news.tj/ru/newspaper/article/rossiya-otmenila-tamozhennye-poshliny-na-gsm>

¹² Including US \$ 3.2 billion for the construction of the Tajik section of the IV line of the Turkmenistan – China gas pipeline; <http://akipress.com/news:547591/>

¹³ Russian Federal Migration Service data. http://www.fms.gov.ru/fms/activity/stats/Statistics/Svedeniya_v_otnoshenii_inostrannih_grazh

¹⁴ Russian Central Bank data; http://www.cbr.ru/statistics/?Prtid=svs&ch=Par_17101#CheckedItem

¹⁵ http://piter.tv/event/FMS_priznali_chno_oblava/

¹⁶ http://www.bbc.com/russian/rolling_news/2013/02/130208_rn_tajikistan_migrants

Consequences of the dependence

The consequence of Tajikistan's dependence on Russia is the conservation of the current system. This on the one hand means relative stability for the state, but on the other increasing stagnation. These tendencies are visible both in the political and socio-civilisational dimensions. In both of the aspects, they are in line with Russia's interests and further strengthen its position.

In the political dimension, the Russian support translates to the regime's durability and the rise of President Rahmon's position, which in turn leads to increasing authoritarianism in Tajikistan. This is true both in regard to the scale of influence that the president and his family exert on the state and economy, as well as the shrinking space for political pluralism (for example the banning of the Islamic Revival Party of Tajikistan)¹⁷ and control over society¹⁸. The role of Rahmon, who has ruled the country since 1994, is increasing, which can also be observed in the legal dimension – for example in December 2015 the Tajik parliament passed a bill providing Rahmon with the status of "Leader of the Nation" which, besides the title, grants him lifelong immunity, which will not cease even when his presidential term ends¹⁹. The author-

itarianism also leads to Rahmon's family being an important element of the political system, with his relatives holding important positions – for example Rahmon's son Rustam is the head of the Customs Administration, his daughter Ozoda is the head of the President's Apparatus, while her husband Jamoliddin Nuraliyev is deputy minister of finance²⁰. Additionally, the president's family is the keystone of the corruption system. Almost every branch of the economy is directly controlled by Rahmon's relatives, who derive benefits from the companies subordinated to them, or participate in the income generated by other entrepreneurs²¹.

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Mass labour migration from Tajikistan is not only the basic source of income for a substantial part of society, it is also a cause of additional social problems. The departure of at least 10% of the population from country, mainly men of working age²², causes for example, adverse demographic changes, the dependence of the entire communities on remittances from Russia, a deterioration in the situation of women – for example the return of legally forbidden polygamy on a scale which has elevated this phenomenon to the rank of a social problem²³ – and Islamic radicalisation. This latter usually takes place during the stay in Russia, where on the one hand radical Islamic ideas are available, and on the other, migrants are often chastised and mistreated. Islamic radicalism is present in Tajik

¹⁷ The party was a part of the United Tajik Opposition and entered parliament after the civil war. In the political dimension, it postulates for a secular modernisation of the state, conducted with respect for Islamic values. For years it was the only opposition party present in the parliament and the only legally functioning Islamic party in the region. In March 2015 it did win enough votes to enter the parliament (which, due to the undemocratic character of the elections, was a political decision), and was criminalised and declared a terrorist organisation in September 2015. Currently some of its leaders are political emigrants (for example the party's chairman Muhiddin Kabiri is residing in Turkey), while those who remained in Tajikistan are persecuted by the authorities.

¹⁸ For example, strengthening the level of control over social and religious (especially Islamic) institutions independent from the authorities, blocking access to information or limiting the freedom of operation for non-governmental organisations; <http://islamreview.ru/community/ulemy-tadzikistana-obavili-vojnu-salafitam/>, <http://www.osce.org/fom/125218> and <http://www.rferl.org/content/tajik-legalizes-blocking-internet/27386494.html>

¹⁹ <http://www.vesta.tj/government/37193-parlament-tadzhi-kistana-prinyal-zakonoproekt-o-lidere-nacii.html>

²⁰ More in: <http://www.eurasianet.org/node/68408>

²¹ <http://cabar.asia/ru/tajikistan/386-nurali-davlat-tadzhi-kistan-korrupsiya-reshaet-vse>

²² In November 2015, men aged between 18 and 29 made up about 40% of the labour migrants (355,000 people). Russian Federal Migration Service data.

²³ <https://iwpr.net/global-voices/despite-ban-polygamy-becoming-normal-tajikistan>

society (one example of it can be the presence of several hundred Tajik citizens in the ranks of Islamic terrorist organisations in Syria, Iraq, Afghanistan and Pakistan)²⁴, but it does not constitute an existential threat for Dushanbe²⁵. Another negative tendency in Tajikistan caused by the neo-colonial stagnation is the civilisational regression, which is visible in two dimensions – the infrastructural and the social. In the case of infrastructure, the problem consists of dilapidated state of the Soviet infrastructure:

The often described rise of the role of Islam in Tajikistan is also linked to the wider process of demodernisation of society, and at times it is impossible to tell these two processes apart.

industrial (for example the aluminium plant TALCO), energy (energy turbines in the hydro-electric power plants and the electric grid) and transport. It is made worse by the lack of funds for it to be renovated²⁶. In the short term the situation is fixed by the financial aid received from international organisations and Chinese loans and investments in the transport infrastructure. However, these are isolated actions, while the problem is of a systemic character. The civilisational regression also has a social aspect and can be seen in, for example, a reduction in educational standards, the lack of a qualified work force and experts, or the gen-

eral decrease of the level of human capital²⁷. The often described rise of the role of Islam in Tajikistan is also linked to the wider process of demodernisation of society (a return to the traditional structures), and at times it is impossible to tell these two processes apart.

No prospects for a positive change

Due to the chronic and structural character of Tajikistan's weakness, its neo-colonial dependence on Russia, and the stagnation caused by the two above factors, an improvement of the situation in Tajikistan seems impossible. Most likely the processes currently in place will become entrenched, resulting in further stagnation. The only possible scenario of a qualitative change in the country is for the worse – the destabilisation of Tajikistan caused by a deterioration of the situation in Russia.

Tajikistan is not capable of generating impulses for modernisation internally. In the political dimension, aside from the structural factors, what hinders development is the lack of political will to change the model of how the state functions. Currently there are no alternatives to the rule of president Rahmon, who through amendments to the constitution eradicated the limit of presidential terms one can serve, and can thus become a lifelong leader. Additionally, even in the case of Rahmon's departure from the political scene, his successor will probably originate from his milieu, and duplicate the same historically and culturally based mechanisms of power and model of relations between the state and society. Rahmon's potential successors include the influential mayor of Dushanbe Mahmadsaid Ubaydulloyev, who for years has been stipulated as such, and the president's closest relatives. The recent constitutional amendments (for example the lowering of the required age of the presidential candidates) are often viewed in this context, as they would allow the participation of Rahmon's son, Rustam, in the 2020 presidential elections²⁸.

²⁴ For example, the commander of the OMON militia special forces, Colonel Gulmurod Khalimov, who in April of 2015 fled to Syria, where he joined the ranks of Islamic State. More in: <http://www.osw.waw.pl/en/publikacje/osw-report/2015-09-21/homo-jihadicus>

²⁵ This can be illustrated even by the above mentioned case of the Colonel Khalimov (after radicalisation he chose to depart for Syria, rather than initiating the fight in Tajikistan), or by the lack of decisive action against the Tajik Islamic radicals abroad, while they are implemented against the secular politicians opposed to Rahmon, utilising highly aggressive methods, including political assassination.

²⁶ More in: [http://www.crisisgroup.org/~media/Files/asia/central-asia/2015%20Central%20Asia%20-%20Decay%20and%20Decline.pdf](http://www.crisisgroup.org/~/media/Files/asia/central-asia/2015%20Central%20Asia%20-%20Decay%20and%20Decline.pdf)

²⁷ *Ibid.*

²⁸ <http://www.rferl.org/content/tajikistan-presidential-dynasty-cleared/27532011.html>

The perspectives for an improvement in Tajikistan's economic situation are also insignificant. The ambitious infrastructural projects planned by Dushanbe will not change that. The region's largest hydroelectric power plant – Rogun – will most likely not enter the construction phase, due to a lack of financing from the World Bank (the US has blocked the financing of large hydroelectric projects)²⁹. Launching an electrical power line capable of exporting electricity to Afghanistan and Pakistan (the CASA 1000 project)³⁰, or the IV line of the Turkmenistan-China gas pipeline (which will pass through Tajikistan)³¹ will not solve the systemic problems of the Tajik economy. Also, the possible exploitation of the potential natural gas resources (estimated at even 3.2 trillion m³)³², due to the state's level of corruption and the lack of a mechanism of effective redistribution, is not going to significantly improve the socio-economic situation, and will not be an impulse for modernisation.

Most likely the society will also fail to initiate changes in the country, Social problems and a poor economic situation do generate social tensions, yet those do not translate to rise of anti-government attitudes. This is caused by a wide range of factors such as the passiveness of Tajik society, the trauma generated by the civil war in the 1990s, the severely negative example of destabilisation in the neighbouring Afghanistan and the absence of the country's most active individuals due to the labour migration, which serves as a safety valve for social tensions. The situation may change in the future, keeping in mind the Russian market's diminishing capabilities to absorb the Tajik labour migrants caused by the deteriorating economic crisis in Russia, as well as Tajikistan's fast demographic growth.

²⁹ Appropriation Act H.R.3547 Section 7060, 7 D, 18th of January 2014, available at: <https://www.congress.gov/bill/113th-congress/house-bill/3547/text>

³⁰ <http://nation.com.pk/business/26-Nov-2015/agreement-signed-for-casa-1000-transmission-line>

³¹ <http://www.eurasianet.org/node/69976>

³² More in: <http://www.osw.waw.pl/en/publikacje/analyses/2013-06-26/will-tajik-gas-change-balance-power-central-asia>

A negative scenario of the further development of the situation in Tajikistan is possible, though its probability is not high. Socio-economic problems constitute the main challenge. The economic situation in Tajikistan will further deteriorate due to the economic crisis in Russia and depreciation of the rouble. The recession in Russia has lowered the demand for the labour force from Tajikistan, while the rouble's depreciation in relation to the US dollar (the currency in which the transfers to Tajikistan are conducted) has significantly lowered the value of remittances from the labour migrants. In the III quarter of 2015 they dropped to almost a quarter of their rate in the same quarter of the previous year (from US \$ 1.348 billion in QIII 2014 to US \$ 358 million in QIII 2015)³³. Simultaneously, the number of Tajiks in Russia has dropped by only 19% (from 1.101 million to 890,000)³⁴.

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The lack of symmetry between those two numbers is caused by the lack of alternatives to working in Russia and the somoni's depreciation against the US dollar (by about 49.6% since December 2014), which serves as a cushion for the lower remittances from the migrants. Nevertheless, the depreciation of the somoni negatively influences the Tajik economy – due to undeveloped exports it cannot be utilised to increase the competitiveness of Tajik goods on external markets, yet the trade deficit continues to grow. If the remittances from the labour migrants continues to drop, the risk of social unrest occurring will grow. Combined with the animosities between the various regions (and the clans rep-

³³ See the Appendix.

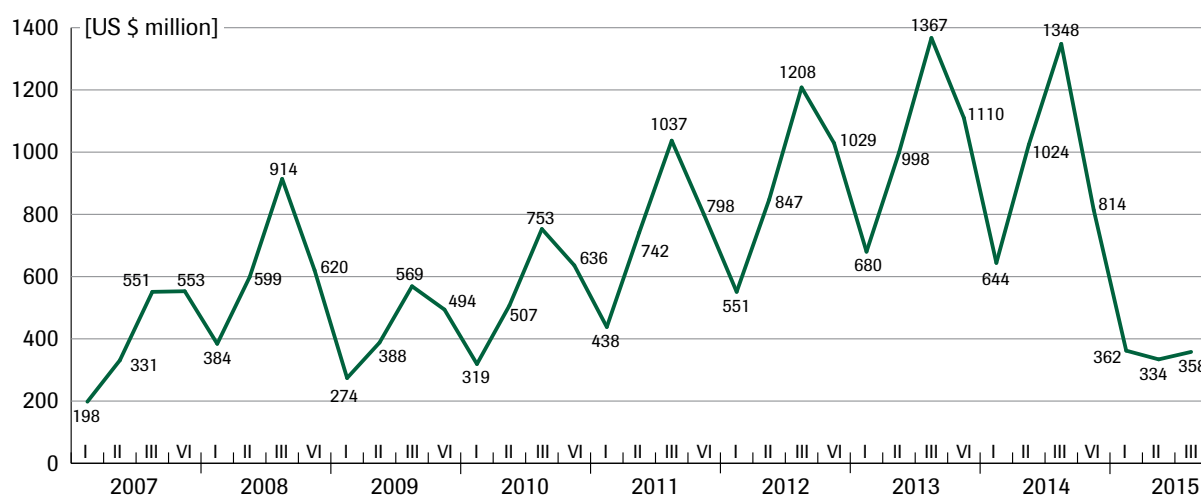
³⁴ Russian Federal Migration Service data.

resenting them), this may lead to the destabilisation of the state. The situation is being further complicated by the strained relations with neighbouring countries – local incidents and border conflicts occur regularly on the border with Kyrgyzstan, and relations with Uzbekistan have been uneasy since independence (lately attempts to improve the situation have been observed, for example the first consultations between the foreign ministries of the two states held in December of 2015; however, the full normalisation of the relations is a distant prospect).

The case of Tajikistan’s post-Soviet, neo-colonial stagnation, while extreme, is not solitary. The mechanisms responsible for the lack of perspectives for improvement in Tajikistan – the combination of an authoritarian, corrupt government, weak and ineffective state institutions, a pauperised and passive society, as well as the economic and political dependence on old and new metropolises – is present on a smaller scale also in the other smaller states of the former USSR which lack hydrocarbon resources – above all Kyrgyzstan and Armenia.

APPENDIX

Remittances from Tajik labour migrants in Russia (US \$ million/quarter)



Data: Central Bank of the Russian Federation*

* http://www.cbr.ru/statistics/?Prtid=svs&ch=Par_17101#CheckedItem

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