

# **A Disconnected Northeast Asia COVID-19 and its Impact on the Borderlands in the Russian Far East**

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## **Introduction**

During the COVID-19 pandemic, Russia did not strongly restrain its economic activities and managed to keep economic recession at a moderate level in comparison to its past economic crises. However, the Russian borders were closed for almost a year to restrict the inflow of foreign workers, who are essential to the maintenance of the nation's economic activities. Foreigners working in Russia come from Central Asian countries such as Uzbekistan, Tajikistan, the Kyrgyz Republic, and Kazakhstan; Caucasus countries such as Armenia and Azerbaijan; European countries of the former Soviet Union such as Ukraine, Belarus, and Moldova; and East Asian countries such as China, North Korea, and Vietnam.

According to statistics from the Russian Ministry of Internal Affairs, 5.48 million foreigners entered Russia as workers in 2019. In 2020, this number dropped by 56.9% to about 2.36 million. During economic crises in the past, the number of legal foreign workers with labor patents (a special work permit for migrant workers from the CIS countries) from Tajikistan and Uzbekistan, which are the largest suppliers of labor to Russia, decreased by 10% to 30%. The decrease in the number of migrant workers in 2020 was a result of the closing of the border to prevent the spread of COVID-19.

The first confirmed case of COVID-19 in Russia was reported on January 31, 2020, but the first restrictions on the movement of people across the border were imposed at the land border between China and Russia on January 30, 2020. Since the novel coronavirus originated in China, restrictions were imposed at 16 entry points on the land border between China and Russia. Soon after that, the Russian government-imposed restrictions on the entry of Chinese nationals via the land border with Mongolia. Until the end of February 2020, attention was focused on the movement of people along the land border in eastern Russia. Until March 2020, quarantine measures did not affect the flow of foreign workers from Central Asian and Caucasian countries. In accordance with Decree No. 635-r of March 16, 2020, Russia closed its borders on March 18, 2020. All foreigners thereby could not enter Russia by air. Soon after, the land borders were also closed. As a result, the inflow of foreign workers from Central Asian and Caucasian countries stopped at the end of March.

In the midst of the COVID-19 pandemic, European countries, which rely on foreign workers in order to preserve their own economic activities, moved to secure foreign labor by using chartered flights. Although the Russian government acknowledged that foreign workers are indispensable to its economy, it did not take any proactive measures to do the same. Therefore, the inflow of labor from Russia's major labor-exporting countries was suspended from April 2020 to March 2021. Legally, there were no restrictions on the return of foreigners who had stayed in Russia. But the

number of charter flights provided by the governments of Central Asian countries for them to return home was too small to accommodate all who wished to return. Consequently, many foreign workers from neighboring countries remained in Russia.

This essay aims to determine how COVID-19 impeded the mobility of people between Russia and its neighboring countries and how the border closure impacted the local economy of the borderlands in the Russian Far East. In doing so, we can identify the precarious landscape of a “disconnected” Northeast Asia during the COVID-19 pandemic.

## 1. Land Borders as the Great Wall

Foreign workers from neighboring countries enter Russia by land, buses, rail, or air. Although travel through land borders takes more time and is not as comfortable as air travel, the inexpensiveness of travel via land borders supports the supply of foreign workers to Russia. Table 1 summarizes the operational status of the points of entry (airport, blue border, and land border) that are surveyed by the International Organization for Migration (IOM) for Russia and neighboring countries. Half of the airports in Russia were operated unrestrictedly, whereas the rest of them were closed. Russia thus attempted to concentrate the quarantine of people entering from abroad in a limited number of international airports. Only Russian nationals were allowed to return from abroad through its land and blue borders. In total, 71% of all airports worldwide are operational, whereas only 52% of all blue borders and 42% of land borders worldwide are operational (IOM 2021). This indicates that it is easier for each country to take quarantine measures at airports than at the blue and land borders. However, approximately 77% of the land borders (408 out of 531) in the European Economic Area are operational in order to ensure the fourth freedom (i.e., the free movement of people) under the Schengen Agreement. In contrast to the EU’s attempts to maintain freedom of movement in the

Table 1. Points of entry status in July 8, 2021

Country	Location	Mobility Restrictions				SUM	%			
		No restrictions	Entry Conditions	Entry restrictions	None reported		No restrictions	Entry conditions	Entry restrictions	None reported
Kazakhstan	Airport	0	2	1	0	3	0	67	33	0
	Land border	0	17	0	2	19	0	89	0	11
	Blue point	0	0	0	3	3	0	0	0	100
Uzbekistan	Airport	0	0	1	0	1	0	0	100	0
	Land border	0	1	0	0	1	0	100	0	0
	Blue point	0	0	0	0	0	-	-	-	-
Tajikistan	airport	1	2	1	0	4	25	50	25	0
	Land border	0	0	19	9	28	0	0	68	32
	Blue point	0	0	0	0	0	-	-	-	-
Kyrgyzstan	Airport	6	0	0	0	6	100	0	0	0
	Land border	13	5	6	0	24	54	21	25	0
	Blue point	0	0	0	0	0	-	-	-	-
Armenia	Airport	2	0	0	0	2	100	0	0	0
	Land border	4	0	0	0	4	100	0	0	0
	Blue point	0	0	0	0	0	-	-	-	-
Azerbaijan	Airport	4	0	0	0	4	100	0	0	0
	Land border	0	11	1	0	12	0	92	8	0
	Blue point	0	4	0	0	4	0	100	0	0
Georgia	Airport	3	0	0	0	3	100	0	0	0
	Land border	4	0	0	0	4	100	0	0	0
	Blue point	2	0	0	0	2	100	0	0	0
Ukraine	Airport	27	0	1	0	28	96	0	4	0
	Land border	105	0	53	1	159	66	0	33	1
	Blue point	14	0	0	0	14	100	0	0	0
Belarus	Airport	2	0	6	0	8	25	0	75	0
	Land border	0	0	26	0	26	0	0	100	0
	Blue point	0	0	0	0	0	-	-	-	-
Russia	Airport	41	0	45	0	86	48	0	52	0
	Land border	0	104	1	1	106	0	98	1	1
	Blue point	0	40	0	0	40	0	100	0	0
World	Airport	840	87	130	109	1166	72	7	11	9
	Land border	1081	803	509	189	2582	42	31	20	7
	Blue point	377	223	67	59	726	52	31	9	8

Source : IOM COVID-19 Mobility restrictions mapping as of July 8 2021

region during the pandemic, Russia presented neither the motivation nor the initiative to ensure the fourth freedom under the Eurasian Economic Union.<sup>1</sup>

Russia effectively stopped accepting foreign workers from its neighboring countries since March 2020, which is when the spread of COVID-19 in the country became pronounced. In addition, the means of transportation for labor to enter Russia were limited due to the closure of its land borders, and the supply of foreign labor was severely constrained institutionally. Simultaneously, many foreign workers from neighboring countries could not return to their home country and remained in Russia.

Figure 1 shows the monthly number of new infections in Russia superimposed on the monthly number of labor patents issued. The number of labor patents issued increased steadily until March 2020, after which it dropped sharply. Traditionally, the number of foreign workers in Russia from former Soviet Union countries fluctuates seasonally. Fewer people work in winter, and the fewest work in January. The figure shows that the restriction of cross-border movement of foreign workers since March 2020 prevented the acceptance of new foreign workers in May, which is usually the peak month for issuing labor patents. Once foreign workers from former Soviet Union countries were allowed to enter Russia in April 2021, the number of newly issued labor patents rapidly increased.

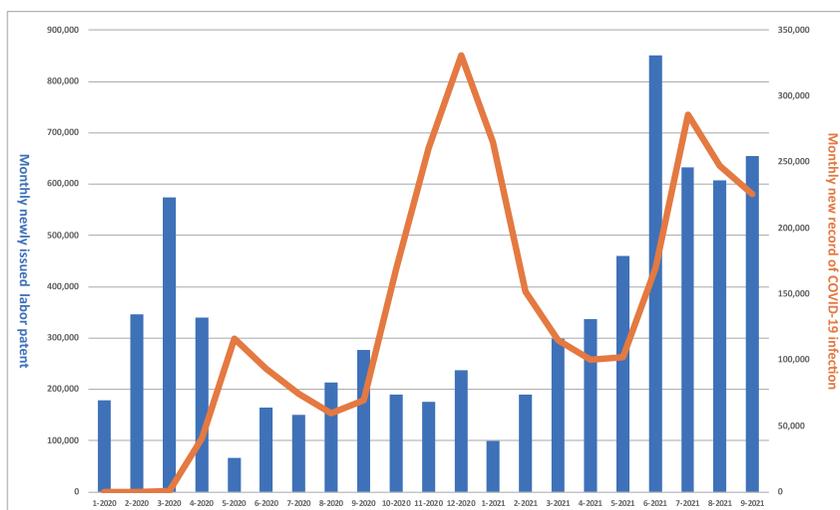


Figure 1. Number of labor patents issued and number of new cases of new coronavirus infection

Source : The number of special work permits issued was collected from the data of the Russian Ministry of Internal Affairs, and the number of newly infected persons was collected from John Hopkins University: <https://data.humdata.org/dataset/novel-coronavirus-2019-ncov-cases>.

<sup>1</sup> Belarusian President Lukashenko claimed the lack of coordination among the Eurasian Economic Union member-countries on trade and labor movement in the pandemic of COVID-19 negatively impact the economy of the region. See Interfax : [https://interfax.by/news/policy/vneshnyaya\\_politika/1274565/](https://interfax.by/news/policy/vneshnyaya_politika/1274565/) (accessed 22 July, 2021) .

The foreign workers who remained in Russia after the border closure were allowed to suspend the validity of their work-related documents until June 15, 2021. This measure allowed temporary foreign workers to continue to stay and work in Russia. Temporary immigrant workers were first registered at the place of their arrival. The initial registration signifies a new entry to Russia, and those who remain in Russia for longer than the period they are allowed are expected to re-register their status. Therefore, the number of registered migrants is greater than the number of initially registered migrants. We can thus expect that the share of initial registrations at the place of arrival during the period when the Russian borders were closed would be much smaller than that in 2019. Table 2 presents immigration-related data for the second and third quarters of 2020.

Belarus did not close its borders with Russia during this period, so the share of initially registered migrants to all registered migrants from Belarus did not drop significantly. With the exception of Belarus, the share of initial registrations dropped significantly for all countries. This implies that the inflow of workers from abroad was strictly limited during this period. A survey of about 8,000 migrants in Moscow City and Moscow Oblast that was conducted in June 2020 by the Institute of Sociology of the Russian Academy of Sciences and the Higher School of Economics revealed that more than 70% of the migrants from the Kyrgyz Republic, Uzbekistan, and Tajikistan intended to remain in Russia rather than return to their home countries (Денисенко and Мукомель 2020). However, this does not mean that those who stayed in Russia remained employed during the pandemic. They often found it difficult to earn their livelihood (Денисенко and Мукомель 2020; Ryazantsev et al. 2020).

Table 2. Number of Registered immigrants at the place of arrival in the Second and Third Quarters in 2019 and in 2020 in comparison

April - September 2019							
	Registered at the place of Arrival (A)	Change from the same term of the previous year (%)	First registration (B)	Change from the same term of the previous year (%)	(B)/(A) (%)	Removal from registration (C)	(A) - (C)
Armenia	338,244	-	192,417	-	56.9	261,431	76,813
Kazakhstan	373,416	-	311,457	-	83.4	338,906	34,510
Kyrgyzstan	522,175	-	303,477	-	58.1	503,219	18,956
Belarus	279,775	-	248,528	-	88.8	220,682	59,093
Tajikistan	1,480,985	-	889,099	-	60.0	1,193,880	287,105
Uzbekistan	2,669,411	-	1,437,901	-	53.9	2,273,786	395,625
Ukraine	789,183	-	601,303	-	76.2	708,942	80,241
Vietnum	52,058	-	42,633	-	81.9	40,840	11,218
China	1,565,353	-	1,525,807	-	97.5	1,442,898	122,455
April - September 2020							
Armenia	136,958	40.5	34,034	17.7	24.8	143,279	-6321
Kazakhstan	122,558	32.8	61,131	19.6	49.9	148,393	-25835
Kyrgyzstan	282,176	54.0	65,084	21.4	23.1	267,550	14626
Belarus	101,564	36.3	72,195	29.0	71.1	96,277	5287
Tajikistan	825,222	55.7	186,373	21.0	22.6	848,558	-23336
Uzbekistan	1,581,818	59.3	347,027	24.1	21.9	1,586,448	-4630
Ukraine	286,308	36.3	124,131	20.6	43.4	314,014	-27706
Vietnum	14,830	28.5	6,244	14.6	42.1	14509	321
China	54,319	3.5	29,414	1.9	54.2	62701	-8382

Source : Compiled by the author from data from the Russian Ministry of Internal Affairs.

## 2. Shortage of migrant workers in the borderlands

As we have discussed above, the inflow of migrant workers was severely restricted and many foreign workers stayed in Russia after the closure of its borders, but they were unable to find their jobs due to the stagnation of economic activities during the COVID-19 pandemic. On the other hand, the closure of the borders caused a shortage of agricultural workers.

To stabilize the supply of agricultural products to the market, Russia introduced quotas that limited the export of major agricultural products to 7 million tons from April 1 to June 30, 2020, and increased subsidies to agricultural producers. The Russian government removed the application of non-working days from agriculture and tried to encourage migrant workers who remained in Russia to move to the agricultural sector from the other industrial sectors (Ломовцева and Пятаева 2020). The Federal Ministry of Agriculture estimated that 23,000 foreign seasonal agricultural workers would need to be supplied by April 2020, and planned to introduce about 11,000 students from agricultural universities into the sector. Additionally, it even devised a plan in cooperation with the Federal Penitentiary Service to use prisoners as agricultural workers. However, students and prisoners not only lacked the skills required to be agricultural workers, but also could not provide enough labor to be compensate for the labor shortage (Поранова 2021). The work performed by immigrant agricultural workers involves a high level of knowledge and skill. For instance, they serve as agricultural machinery operators, agricultural engineers, agricultural specialists, and skilled agricultural laborers. Therefore, immigrant agricultural workers were found to be essential workers during the pandemic.

The situation was even more complicated in the borderlands of the Russian Far East. Soybeans are the primary produce in the border regions of the Russian Far East. Soybean production in Russia is dominated by large-scale mechanized production. Soybeans are mainly exported to China owing to its proximity to Russia. Such production areas are located near the peripheries of the nation, and production cannot be sustained only by local workers. Traditionally, the labor force has mainly been constituted by Chinese agricultural workers. Therefore, the closure of the Sino-Russian border had a significant impact on labor supply.

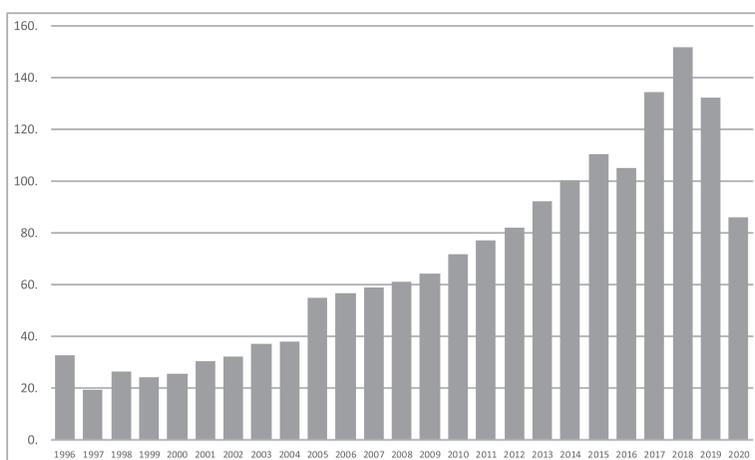


Figure 2. Trends in soybean sowing area in the Jewish Autonomous Region (Unit : 1000 ha)

Source : Data obtained from EMICC

After the collapse of the USSR, agricultural land in Russia was left largely abandoned. However, soybean production in the Russian Far East expanded independently and recorded its largest post-USSR acreage in 2019. In the Jewish Autonomous Oblast, the sown area expansion peaked in 2018, and a slight decrease was recorded in 2019 due to the flooding of the Amur River (Figure 2) . In 2020, the sown area in the Jewish Autonomous Oblast decreased by 35.0% in comparison 2019. This decrease was significant, especially compared to that of the Primorsky Krai (−12.9%) , Khabarovsk Krai ( −10.6%) , and Amur Oblast ( −2.9%) . In 2019, the Amur River overflowed and submerged many farmlands in the Jewish Autonomous Oblast. However, the sharp decrease in the sown area in 2020 was not due to environmental factors. Rather, it resulted from a failure to implement the sowing plan.

The implementation failure possibly resulted from the lack of labor required for sowing. Approximately 90% of the soybean production in the Jewish Autonomous Oblast occurs Leninsky District and Oktyabrsky District. The production of soybeans requires skilled agricultural workers. Both of these districts are more than 100 km away from the provincial capital, Birobidzhan, and are extremely depopulated areas with low population densities. It is difficult to secure seasonal agricultural laborers within the districts, and they thus depend on the labor supply from China. However, the supply of foreign seasonal laborers was cut off due to border closure caused by the COVID-19 pandemic. There were 5754 registered immigrants in the Jewish Autonomous Oblast in 2019, but this number reduced to only 890 in 2020.

In fact, after the spring sowing, local media<sup>2</sup> reported a drastic decrease in the sown area in the Jewish Autonomous Oblast. The total sown area in 2020 was 166 thousand hectares, which was 36% decrease in comparison to that of the previous year. This local media attributed this drastic decrease to two factors. First, local producers could not secure enough local workers to compensate for the foreign seasonal workers that were lost due to border closures. Second, the company managers of all 44 Chinese agricultural companies in the region were unable to come to the region to manage the spring sowing. However, most local farmers realized more than 90% of their sowing plans despite facing labor shortages. This signifies that the significant drop in the sown area in 2020 largely stemmed from the dependence on Chinese capital and labor.

The absence of Chinese managers and workers in this region resulted in a significant reduction in the soybean harvest. In the borderlands, the dependence on Chinese workers and capital was inextricably linked to the traffic of people through the land border. According to the Russian Federal Statistics Service's press release, the Jewish Autonomous Oblast harvested 5.9 tons of soybeans in 2020. This equaled 97.2% of the previous year's total. Although this statistic may make it appear like the decrease in sown area was offset by the high productivity, it presents a deceptive picture. The overflowing of the Amur River in July 2019 significantly reduced the 2019 harvest. Compared to the flood-free 2018 soybean harvest (148,000 tons) , the 2019 soybean harvest was only 61,000 tons (40.9% of the previous year's harvest) due to the flooding. Therefore, it can be argued that the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on soybean production was at a level that surpassed that caused by the massive flooding of the Amur River.

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<sup>2</sup> EAOMedia.ru: <https://eaomedia.ru/news/989138/> (Accessed 26 August, 2021)

## Conclusions

This essay focused on soybean production in the agricultural area near the Sino–Russian border in the Russian Far East, which is highly dependent on Chinese labor and capital. It revealed that the border closure resulted in a significant reduction in the sowing area of the region. The supply of foreign labor since March 2021 has returned level it was at prior to the COVID–19 pandemic. There is thus no longer any concern about the supply of foreign workers. However, the COVID–19 pandemic revealed how vulnerable agriculture in the borderlands can become without foreign workers. Soybean production significantly dropped in the borderlands due the closure of the Sino–Russian border in 2020. Thus, the precarity of “disconnected” Northeast Asia” was made evident during the pandemic.

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