

Niftiyev, Ibrahim

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## International spillovers of social challenges as a result of sanctions against Russia: An evaluation of the Azerbaijani case

**Ibrahim NIFTIYEV**

*PhD Candidate, University of Szeged, Szeged, Hungary*

*Centre for Studies on European Economy (AIM) - Azerbaijan State University of Economics (UNEC), Baku, Azerbaijan, [ibrahimniftiyev@gmail.com](mailto:ibrahimniftiyev@gmail.com)*

### Abstract

Since February 2022, a new phase of the war between Russia and Ukraine has begun. Apart from the direct consequences for Russia and Ukraine, all post-Soviet countries are affected, as Western sanctions against Russia significantly limit the economic development and cooperation prospects of the post-Soviet region. Azerbaijan is one of Russia's most important trading partners and a neighboring country, and there are serious concerns that these sanctions could have a negative impact on Azerbaijan's socioeconomic life. This is mainly because domestic production in Russia has declined, agricultural exports have been curtailed, and trade and transportation routes have been disrupted. Against the background of all these factors, the social impact of this situation seems to be dramatic. Therefore, this article analyzes qualitative data from social media and websites dealing with Azerbaijan's social challenges. To this end, expert opinions were analyzed using the thematic analysis method to examine the social impact of sanctions at three levels: people living abroad (migrants or expats), remittances, and the purchasing power of locals. The results show that there is a high expectation among experts that sanctions could have a negative impact on remittance flows from Russia to Azerbaijan due to the devalued Russian ruble. There is also a possibility that migrants working and living in Russia will return to Azerbaijan in greater numbers. Finally, experts agreed that the purchasing power of locals in Azerbaijan has declined due to sharp price increases that followed the production slump and export restrictions in Russia. These findings could support ongoing preparations for new socioeconomic realities in Azerbaijan as a result of Western sanctions against Russia. Now policymakers must develop a plan to quickly address Azerbaijan's social problems, even if it is not an emergency.

**Keywords:** Azerbaijani economy, expert opinion, Russia, sanctions, social impacts, thematic analysis



## 1. Introduction

In international relations, there is a famous saying, "When America sneezes, the world catches a cold." In other words, the United States of America (USA) is considered a leader on the international stage and is therefore followed by other countries. For better or worse, the rest of the world is feeling the effects of America's actions (Nicholas, 2018). For the countries of the former Soviet Union (FSU), Russia can be considered like the USA. In other words, the strong interconnectedness of international trade, labor and capital flows, and geopolitical interactions make Russia the most important country among the FSU countries for the smaller nations. Azerbaijan should be no exception, as it is an FSU country that is currently closely linked to the Russian economy. Put differently, many domestic producers export their products to the Russian market, many migrants move to Russia to work and send remittances home, and important consumer goods are imported from Russia to Azerbaijan due to favorable logistics. As soon as the war between Russia and Ukraine began on February 22, 2022, various experts, either directly on their social media accounts or through news media channels, discussed at length the potential impact on the Azerbaijani economy. A careful analysis of these opinions could reveal specific insights into the concretization of sanctions against Russia on Azerbaijan.

Certainly, people are the main sufferers of geopolitical tensions, and it is understandable that the social impact of Western sanctions on Russia will be more profound. According to official statistics, about 553,000 Azerbaijanis live in Russia (Aghayeva, 2022). Some of the Azerbaijani workers and emigrants still live and work in Russia. However, some of them had to return to Azerbaijan due to high unemployment after the war (Aghayeva, 2022). Some factories have closed, imports have become more expensive, and purchasing power in Russia has plummeted (Aghayeva, 2022). This has triggered the emigration of non-Russians and non-citizens from Russia. The number of migrants is expected to return to Azerbaijan and pose socioeconomic challenges to the government.

Azerbaijanis still go to Russia to work and send money to their home country, even though unemployment is particularly high there (Aghayeva, 2022). While some experts have expressed great concern about the potential negative impact of sanctions on remittances and migration, Azerbaijani media indicate that there are no major problems. Thus, despite the devaluation of the ruble and the apparent loss of purchasing power, Azerbaijani workers and businessmen continue to send money through the "Zolotaya Korona" system, which circumvents the SWIFT-related international restrictions on the Russian banking system. However, these contradictory ideas need to be analyzed systematically and in detail using the qualitative data collected.

Considering that the economies of Russia and Azerbaijan are closely intertwined, the research question of this paper is as follows: What is the impact of Western sanctions against Russia on the potential social challenges that may arise in the Azerbaijani economy? In order to answer this question, the collection of the qualitative data was more purposeful, as the quantitative data and the full official statistics for 2022 have not been published yet. Moreover, the official statistics may not truly reflect the current realities on the ground. There is a need to create a more contextual narrative under these new conditions. Therefore, the main objective of this paper is to shed light on the social dimension of sanctions against the Azerbaijani economy. For this purpose, 134 expert opinions were obtained, resulting in a unique dataset covering various topics. Thematic analysis (TA) was chosen as it was the most appropriate and optimal method to group the main topics of discussion in order to establish a link



between the possible channels of international spillover effects of sanctions. This topic has not yet been systematically and scientifically researched. However, a small and oil-dependent country like Azerbaijan needs accurate and valid assessments of the upcoming challenges resulting from the sanctions. Therefore, this paper contributes to the literature and especially urges policy makers to prepare for the coming social challenges posed by the ongoing Russo-Ukrainian war.

The next section is a brief literature review focusing on Central Asia and the South Caucasus. The third section reports on the data and methodology of the study. The fourth section presents the results and an Azerbaijan-specific model of the international spillover effects of social challenges caused by Western sanctions. Finally, the fifth section provides a conclusion.

## 2. Literature Review

After the collapse of the USSR, FSU countries designated mutual customs unions and joined newly formed alliances to resume the economic partnerships once created by the central government of the Soviet Union (Aituar, 2021). Many FSU countries integrated trade, labor and capital mobility, and cultural ties. This was only natural, given the diverse historical and geographic features of the FSU area. However, with the start of the new phase of the Russo-Ukrainian war in February 2022, military actions were immediately followed by Western sanctions against Russia, resulting in a constrained economy and social discontent in Russia. Of course, these sanctions have a direct impact on the Russian economy, but third countries, especially those of the former Soviet Union, also run the risk of being harmed. This has been discussed at length by various scholars in the growing literature on the impact on the Russian economy since 2008—after the Russo-Georgian war.

As a result of the annexation of Crimea in 2014, Russia was subjected to severe economic sanctions by the West (primarily NATO, the USA and its allies; Kazantsev, 2017). While Russia certainly suffers primarily economically from the sanctions imposed (Gould-Davies, 2018), sanctioning countries can also lose up to 3% of their GDP (Huang and Lu, 2022). The economic impact of sanctions on third countries is complicated by several other variables, including the degree of interconnectedness of the sanctioned nation with its major trading partners, the duration of the penalties, and the ambition of the sanctions (Kaempfer and Lowenberg, 2007). In the literature, sanctions against Russia were sometimes seen as an opportunity for some third countries (Telegina and Khalova, 2019; Horak, 2021), while in some other cases they were a clear threat (Caruso, 2003; Slavov, 2007).

It is important to note that in the current situation, Western sanctions may represent an opportunity or possibly a serious concern for third parties, such as the countries of the former Soviet Union. This has been documented in the previously published literature. For example, Abdullayev's (2019) analysis showed that agricultural exporters in the Fargana Valley (Uzbekistan) suffered from backward economic policies that favored cotton and wheat and limited opportunities to increase exports to Russian markets. In addition, there were bureaucratic problems, difficulties with documentation, and confusing banking requirements. However, for some scholars, such as Bazileva et al. (2016), Western sanctions appeared to be an opportunity to export more to Russia.



The ongoing war is also having an impact on other Central Asian countries. The economy of Kazakhstan, for example, appears to be more affected by Western sanctions than the others (Ishmukhamedov, 2015), but societies in the other countries of the region are also affected. While the Kyrgyz som has been losing value against foreign currencies since the war began (Kazatchkine, 2022), medical and life-saving products, most of which are imported from Russia, have been particularly affected (Kazatchkine, 2022). These developments are leading to a more optimistic attitude toward groupings such as the Eurasian Economic Union (EAEU), as such organizations can help smaller countries minimize harmful spillover effects that typically emanate from Russia during sanctions periods (Kudaibergenova, 2016).

In the case of Armenia, Branch (2018) argues that the dependence of Armenia's critical infrastructure, such as electricity and natural gas, which are also generally affected by Western sanctions, is due to Russia's extensive presence in the country. Gharabegian (2015) pointed out that Western sanctions affect cooperation between Russia and Armenia, as Russia's economic potential shrinks due to the restrictions. Other impacts may include a decline in remittances (Giucci, 2022) and international trade (Shrinyan, 2019). In the latter case, trade flows begin to shift from the EAEU to EU countries, according to Shirinyan (2019).

Newnham (2015) discussed the Georgian case, in which close geographic proximity created a reality in which Georgia and Russia had a very close economic relationship. In fact, Georgia struggled with remittances when Western sanctions were imposed in 2014, as Russia was the most important trading partner for Georgia (Hamilton, 2018). Even before 2014 and the 2008 war between Georgia and Russia, EU sanctions against Russia triggered counter-sanctions and punitive measures by Russia against Georgia (Indans, 2007). Russia pressured Georgia by blocking its wine, fruit, and mineral water exports (Indans, 2007). This shows that small countries of the former Soviet Union that are closely intertwined with Russia can suffer from Western sanctions either directly (by forgoing exports due to the sanctions) or indirectly (through Russia's own punitive measures to restrict imports).

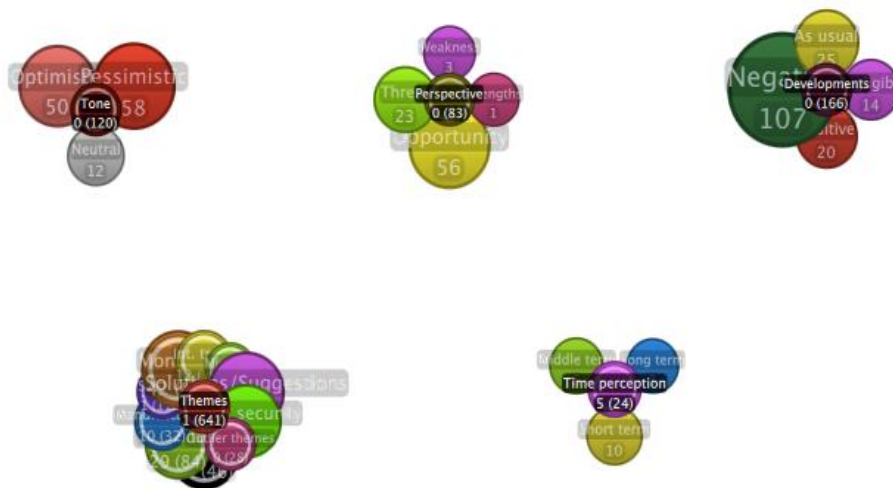
In all cases, one thing is clear: the so-called Western sanctions against Russia do not harm just one country. Historical and geographic circumstances have allowed Russia and post-Soviet countries to increase their economic prosperity by establishing deep and diverse economic ties with each other. This, in turn, has led small post-Soviet countries to base their future economic activities or expectations, such as export and migration, on the Russian economy. Azerbaijan is no exception. Although academic research on this topic is sparse compared to social and news media, there are certainly logical expectations regarding causal relationships between Western sanctions and the Azerbaijani economy. Based on the literature review and observations, the research question posed in this article should be considered reasonable in 2022, when the new phase of Russo-Ukrainian military conflict has begun.

### 3. Data and Methodology

TA is a qualitative research method in which data are first extensively illustrated and then interpreted through thematic classifications (Alhojailan, 2012). Many researchers now consider TA as a legitimate qualitative research method in its own right, complementing more traditional approaches such as grounded theory, story analysis, and document analysis (Braun and Clarke, 2012). TA is well suited

when quantitative methods do not yield meaningful results, especially when numerical data are not available. This is the reason why this study was conducted, because no other quantitative method could answer the research question of the study.

The data source for the current TA was social and news media platforms. For example, Facebook, LinkedIn, YouTube, etc. Some reliable news agency websites found through Google search were also included in the data source. The method of data collection combined two techniques: observation (extracting information from social media or news media) and keyword search (using predetermined keywords such as "impact of Russian sanctions on the Azerbaijani economy", "Azerbaijan and Russia, sanctions", etc.). The qualitative data collected were mainly from February, March, and April. The search was conducted in three languages, namely Azerbaijani, English and Russian. All non-English sources were translated into English. More than 75% of the data is in Azerbaijani language. All data were converted to text as some of them are video materials.



**Figure 1: Quirk canvas (primary) of the study's thematic analysis.**

*Source:* Author's own construction.

The author states that there is no ethical conflict in this study because all data were obtained from publicly available sources such as public posts on social media and news sites. The data were analyzed using Quirkos qualitative analysis software, version 2.5.2. The main Quirkos code list is described below, showing the most important codes and their frequencies (in parentheses, see Figure 1). Quirkos enabled intuitive coding and thematic analysis of the data by identifying the main directions of subthemes and key ideas.

#### 4. Results

This section reports on three main themes of TA: workforce, remittances, and dependence on Russia. The style of this section is a narrative summary of expert opinions collected through social and media channels. Only the social aspects of the qualitative data collected are analyzed, as the focus of this article is on the international impact of Western sanctions against Russia.

##### Theme 1: Workforce

For the experts who spoke out on social media and news outlets, labor was the most important issue in expressing their concern about the impact of Western sanctions on the Azerbaijani economy. The experts pointed out that Azerbaijan not only considers Russian markets as the main destination for its non-oil exports but also exports labor to Russia. A decrease in revenues and a devaluation of the Russian ruble are expected after the sanctions, which will affect workers' remittances to their home country. Or to put it another way, Russian small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs) will be affected by the sanctions, which in turn will lead to mass layoffs. This will increase unemployment, which in turn may trigger a mass return of Azerbaijani workers. If they do not return or find other employment, this could lead to an increase in criminal activity. Some experts have suggested that the surplus Azerbaijani labor in Russia should be used for reconstruction projects in the liberated territories of Azerbaijan:

*“Moreover, if the supply in the labor market of a country increases, there may be a decrease in wages, an increase in the number of unemployed people, and criminal cases. In this case, it is possible to compensate for the cheap labor by using it for reconstruction in the liberated areas”.* – 034 - Rauf Tagiyev

Another social challenge concerns the community of workers itself. In other words, with Azerbaijan's land borders closed and air travel restricted due to the sanctions, people who want to visit their families in Azerbaijan have to pay higher ticket prices and spend much more time than in the pre-sanctions era.

TA revealed that some experts used the post-sanction challenges as a springboard to express concern about the structural and institutional problems (e.g., monopolies, inefficiencies, low enforcement of the rule of law) in the Azerbaijani economy that have triggered the exodus of labor from Azerbaijan. In other words: If these problems can be resolved, there is no need to worry about the potential negative social impact of sanctions on the Azerbaijani economy. In fact, the prospects of finding new jobs in Russia will be much lower due to the sanctions. Moreover, not all experts were pessimistic about the current situation between Russia and the West:

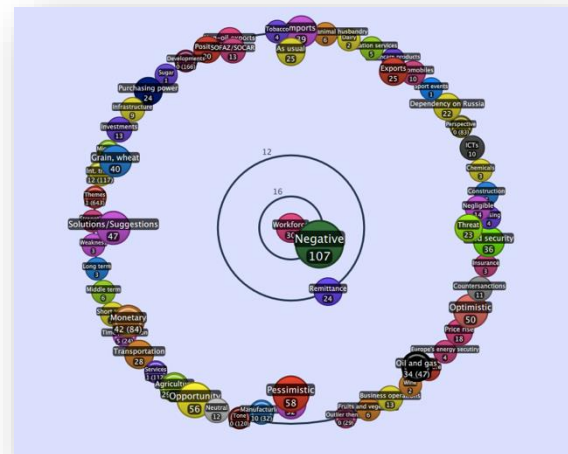


Figure 2: Overlap map of the workforce theme.

Source: Author's own construction.

Notes: The numbers inside the quirks are overall quantities of the coding; for the major co-coding follow the number next to the inner circles.



*“As for migration, there may be such facts. However, I do not believe that it will spread. Because in 2014 sanctions were imposed on Crimea, the ruble lost value, there were economic difficulties, but Azerbaijanis did not decide to return to their homeland. Because if they returned to Azerbaijan, they could face the same problems, i.e. unemployment, difficulties in starting a business. All this delayed their desire to return home. And now I think that our compatriots will wait for a while.” – 063 - Natig Jafarli*

*“For example, thanks to the additional revenue from oil, Azerbaijan will be able to provide unemployment benefits to citizens who have lost their jobs in Russia and returned home. 130 dollars per barrel is a very big difference, and the extra money could go to social security and social benefits.” – WBR002*

Finally, the workforce theme was co-coded "negative" 16 times, indicating expected negative effects rather than positive or negligible effects of sanctions on the Azerbaijani workforce (see Figure 2). Similarly, the remittances theme was co-coded 12 times with the labor force theme 12 times. Next, the labor force was co-coded three times with the pessimistic views. Finally, there were some minor co-coding with the themes of banks and solutions/proposals, while some experts were pessimistic and viewed the developments as a threat to the Azerbaijani economy.

## **Theme 2: Remittance**

The second main theme within the socioeconomic challenges of the overall analysis of TA concerned remittances. The main concerns of the experts were the decrease in remittances due to the devaluation of the RUB, increased unemployment, and decreased purchasing power of the RUB in Russia. As demand for RUB has steadily declined since February 2022, the value of RUB has weakened against major currencies such as the USD and the euro. International trade and the number of business activities of multinational companies (MNCs) have declined in Russia, leading to higher unemployment. In addition, the purchasing power of RUB has decreased due to the shortage of goods and services, even though locals and migrants have been able to keep their jobs. The overall observation of all three of these factors contributed to the general perception that remittances from Russia to Azerbaijan could decline significantly, as well as the expectation that workers who once left Azerbaijan to find better job opportunities would migrate back.

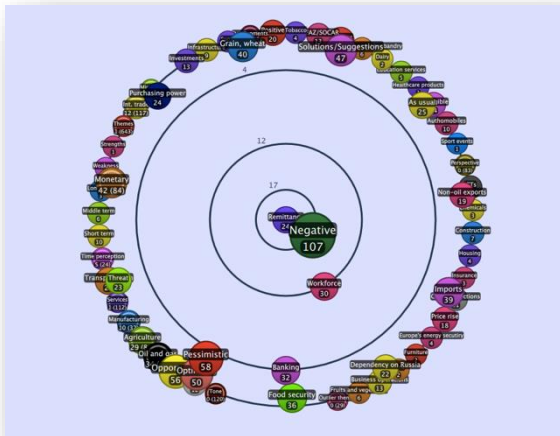
*“It should be noted that about 2.5 million Azerbaijanis live in Russia. Most of these people also send money to their relatives in Azerbaijan. This means that the incomes of Azerbaijanis living there will decrease in the coming months as the ruble rapidly loses value. This will limit their ability to increase their income and send it to their families here”. – 024 - Rashad Hasanov*

Declining remittances could pose a serious risk to remittance-dependent Azerbaijani families whose breadwinners (usually men or husbands) are in Russia and provide for the family alone. Although experts point out that the number of families receiving remittances is no longer critically high in Azerbaijan compared to the 1990s, this situation is still undesirable. Experts have identified two social groups that are most vulnerable to remittance shocks: the families of agricultural exporters and food importers. In the event of a complete stop to remittances, these families should either find their own ways to solve problems at the family level or turn to the government for social support programs. For this reason, some experts have suggested using the increased oil revenues to restore support to



Azerbaijani families disadvantaged by the sanctions. Overall, one thing is clear: a fairly solid number of families have become accustomed to meeting their socioeconomic needs with the help of remittances from Russia. A family consists of several people. Thus, if remittances decrease significantly, loss of wealth, social discontent, and minor tensions are inevitable.

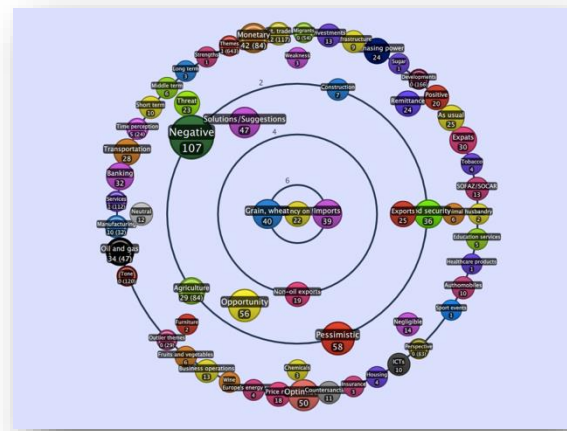
From the overlap map of the remittances theme shown in Figure 3, we can see that money transfers and negative effects were co-coded 17 times. It is obvious that remittances and labor are thematically very closely related. Therefore, they were co-coded 12 times. The third most frequent co-coding was between the categories of banks and remittances (4 times). As mentioned earlier, the families of agricultural exporters and food importers may be more susceptible to a decline in remittances.



**Figure 4: Overlap map of the remittance theme.**

*Source: Author's own construction.*

*Notes:* The numbers inside the quirks are overall quantities of the coding; for the major co-coding follow the number next to the inner circles.



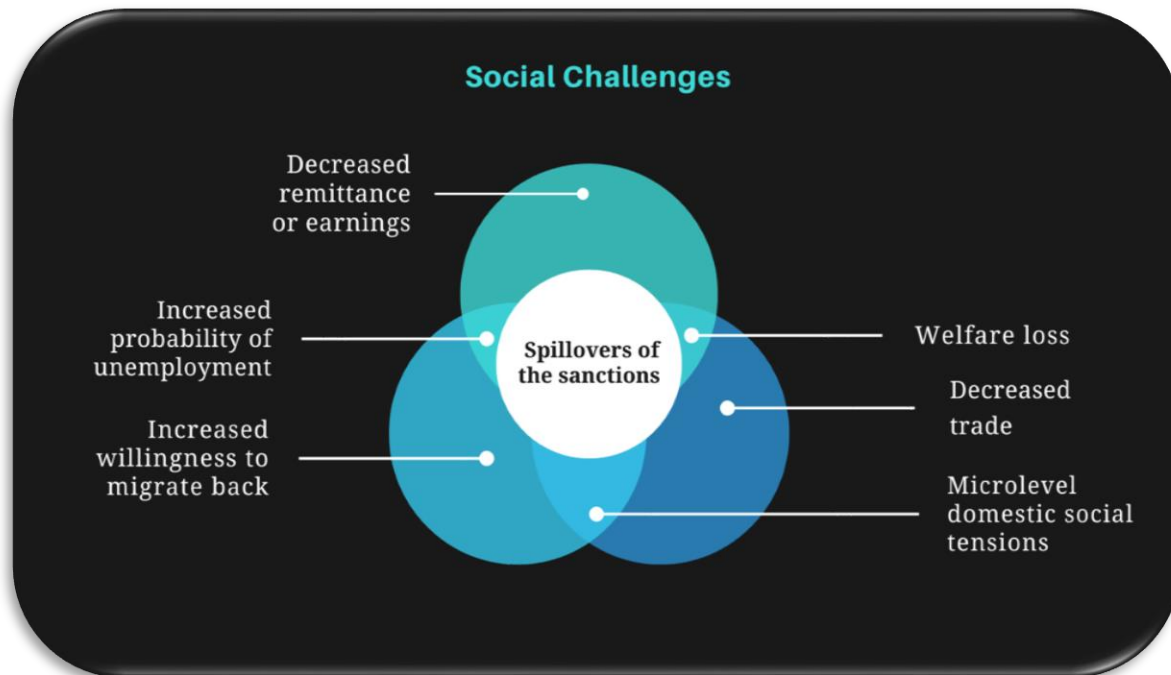
**Figure 3: Overlap map of the dependence on Russia theme.**

*Source: Author's own construction.*

*Notes:* The numbers inside the quirks are overall quantities of the coding; for the major co-coding follow the number next to the inner circles.

The categories of grains and wheat, food safety, and some pessimistic and optimistic views about remittances were also co-coded to a small extent.

### Theme 3: Dependence on Russia



**Figure 5: Azerbaijan-specific framework of social challenges as a result of the sanctions against Russia.**

*Source:* Author's own construction based on TA.

The collapse of the Soviet Union did not leave the individual countries of the FSU entirely on their own. Strong trade and economic relations with each other, and especially with Russia, remained the most important prerequisite for survival. However, this also meant that the FSU countries remained dependent on Russian markets, whether for labor or consumers. The renewed Russo-Ukrainian war shows that this dependence can bring serious dangers for the national economy in critical times.

For this reason, experts were also concerned about the problem of Azerbaijan's dependence on Russia. This dependence mainly concerns grain imports and non-oil exports (mainly agricultural products, but also manufacturing sector products such as chemicals, see Figure 4). This dependence has always been a concern, but all discussions and debates have usually taken place in a secure environment and at calm times. Now, the Russo-Ukrainian war changes many things and makes it necessary once again to reduce the dependence of the Azerbaijani economy on Russia. This will also solve the social and economic problems of the country (e.g. low income, unemployment, high crime rate). Consequently, dependence on Russia is the third major social challenge that the recent war poses for Azerbaijan. The frequency and magnitude of this discussion on social media and in the news is remarkable and calls for policymakers and government officials to carefully consider this in strategic planning for the national economy.



Taking into account the social challenges expressed by Azerbaijani experts since February 2022, Figure 5 illustrates the Azerbaijan-specific framework of social challenges as a result of sanctions against Russia. According to the figure, the spillovers of sanctions may be welfare losses that include lower remittances or income from Russia and lower trade between the countries. The increased likelihood of unemployment, in addition to lower incomes, also affects the willingness to migrate back to Azerbaijan. Finally, lower trade and a higher willingness to migrate back could lead to social tensions at the micro level if the surplus labor force is not provided with adequate job security. This framework is based on the TA and synthesis of expert opinion in the case of Azerbaijan but may also be relevant for other post-Soviet countries.

## 5. Concluding remarks

The Russo-Ukrainian war continues, and it is unlikely to end soon. The war has serious direct implications for both Russia and Ukraine, but third countries, particularly those in the former Soviet Union, may also face challenges they never had. These may be disruptions to international trade, investment, financial relations, transportation, value chains, labor, remittances, etc. These challenges became particularly pressing in 2020 and 2021 following the economic and social recession triggered by COVID-19. As an FSU country, Azerbaijan stands out for its close trade ties and large labor force in Russia. Moreover, Azerbaijan has hardly been studied in the context of Western sanctions that might emanate from Russia. Therefore, the aim of this article was to analyze what might happen to the Azerbaijani labor force and overall economy as a result of Western sanctions against Russia. For this purpose, expert opinions were used as the main qualitative data expressed through social and news media platforms.

The results show that it is unlikely that Azerbaijan can experience a state of emergency in the international spillover effects of social challenges resulting from sanctions against Russia. The experts argued that it may take longer for workers to decide whether to stay in Russia or return to Azerbaijan. On the other hand, Azerbaijan is less likely to experience political anxiety or destructive debates about the possible social problems sourced by Western sanctions. However, given the large number of Azerbaijani workers in Russia, one thing is certain: there will be a negative impact on the welfare of families whose breadwinners are in Russia. Likewise, agricultural exporters could lose out due to Russia's restricted imports as well as the devaluation of the RUB.

Azerbaijanis working and living in Russia are now experiencing hard times because of the ongoing war. However, their cost-benefit analysis of whether to stay in Azerbaijan or return there is not yet complete. Logically, the Azerbaijani government could face additional political challenges if workers who once left the country return in the hope that they will work in their home country. Experts point out that even if the risks are low and there are no negative trends in this matter, it might be wise to put the issue on the government's political agenda. In other words, the Russian economic crisis due to sanctions could become an international social challenge for Azerbaijan. However, is the Azerbaijani government prepared for unexpected scenarios by developing a firm political consciousness to address the problems of its citizens who once left the country in search of better job opportunities and a higher standard of living?



This TA is broad and the results reflect a wide range of expert concerns. I propose to conduct in-depth interviews with both ordinary citizens working or doing business in Russia and Azerbaijani government officials to obtain clearer and more focused information about this situation. It seems that one crisis follows another. First the outbreak of Covid-19 and now the Russo-Ukrainian war are endangering national economies, the well-being of the vast majority, and international stability. The current issue can be well worked up in both academic and political circles to shed light on the future of Azerbaijan's economic security. Fundamental prerequisites for this are diversification of domestic industry and energy and food security. Therefore, one of the issues analyzed in this study is dependence on Russia. This is the risky aspect of Azerbaijan's economy when it comes to non-oil exports and labor force working abroad.

Hence, geopolitical and international relations dictate how economies and societies should function and operate. The recent Russo-Ukrainian war is no exception. A large country like Russia has an enormous impact on economic and social relations in all other FSU countries. The literature dealing with the impact of sanctions against Russia on third countries has begun to grow. I believe that the Azerbaijani case study is interesting and promising in this sense, as the expert opinions were dynamically and promptly expressed on social media, extensively discussed and carefully listened to.

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