

LABOR MIGRATION PROCESS IN CENTRAL ASIA

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ABSTRACT

Migration, especially migration of people to other countries in search of employment has occurred all through history has become an important phenomenon of the 21 century. In the period of globalization, the new migration trends appeared which started to cause various effects. Labor migration is one of the key trends dominating in all regions including Central Asia. This paper focuses on labor migration to and from the five Central Asian states: Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, Turkmenistan and Uzbekistan which are all covered with this type of migration. At the same time, it is really difficult to exclude Russia which is the main migration hub. There are a number of issues which need new approaches and more effective cooperation despite the increasing scale and importance of the process for the region.

KEYWORDS: *Labor Migration, Treaty, Declaration, Security, Policy-Making Documents, Convention, Law, Migrant, Immigration.*

INTRODUCTION

Migration Process

The whole history of humankind has been interconnected with migration.

It is a process which firstly occurred about 60,000 years ago.¹ If we look back to the history, we will find out that migration is a natural process which has been known for a very long time. The current mass migration will not be understood unless without providing a historical insight. One of the first ancestors – *Homo sapiens* - arised in East Africa and gradually migrated firstly across Africa, then through the world tropical zones and subsequently into American and Eurasian zones. As the *Homo sapiens* were migrating they were also developing languages and creating tools. As they were scattered throughout the world the distinctions between languages and customs were widening. The human migration is being divided into three main phases. The first phase was about settling of today's Europe, Asia and Africa. In the second phase *Homo sapiens* migrated from North Africa to the Arabian Peninsula and South Asian subcontinent. Fishing was one of the main reasons why this second phase occurred. The last phase occurred with lowering of sea level. The human race developed maritime skills and was able to settle places as Hawaii, Australia, Easter Island, Oceania or South-East Asian islands.² A significant migration occurred in America during 1848–1855. It is known as “*California Gold Rush*”. News about huge clods of gold being mined in California widespread around the world incredibly fast. This fact attracted

so many people that it became one of the largest migrations in the American history. More than 300,000 people arrived in that time one of the most remoted destinations in the world, because of gold³ Even more significant migration occurred in between 1820-1980, also in America. The number of migrants escalated into 37,000,000 European citizens.⁴ The Second World War was a tragedy, but the tragedy did not end with its end. One of the results was millions of expelled or homeless. The end of the Second World War is a beginning of huge population migrations. Most affected were Jews and Germans. Germany as the loosing nation which even caused the war was suffering perhaps even unnecessary viciousness.

By 2008 around 200 million people – about 3% of the total world population– lived outside their homelands. Although, Central Asia represents only a fraction of the world's total migrant population, the region's economies are heavily influenced by migrant workers. Tajikistan has the world's highest proportion of remittances to GDP. In 2007 remittances comprised 36% of its GDP, or \$1.8 billion, while Kyrgyzstan ranked fourth in the world, with 27% of GDP or \$322 million.⁵ Some reports estimate that Tajikistan's remittances make up as much as 46% of its GDP.³ With that, neither country ranks nearly as high in terms of the volume of remittances received. India and China lead this category, receiving \$27 billion and \$25.7 billion, respectively, in 2007. Russia leads all other former Soviet states in receiving remittances, with \$4 billion received in 2007.

	Migrants (Millions)	World population (Billions)	Migrants as percent of world population	Annual change (Millions)
1965	75	3.3	2.3	
1975	85	4.1	2.1	1
1985	105	4.8	2.2	2
1990	154	5.3	2.9	10
1995	164	5.7	2.9	2
2000	175	6.1	2.9	2

Migrants are defined as person living outside their country of birth or citizenship for 12 months or more. The estimate for 1990 was raised from 120 million to 154 million, largely to reflect the break-up of the Soviet Union. Source: United Nations: International migration report 2002, ST/ESA/SER.A/220 (New York, United Nations, Department of Economic and Social Affairs, 2002).

Labor Migrants of Central Asia

In Central Asia, most labor migrants move from south to north – from countries deprived of natural resources and with a labor surplus, to resource rich countries where labor is in short supply. Russia is the first migration hub for Central Asian migrants and Kazakhstan became an important destination state since early 2000s. Three other CA countries – Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan and Uzbekistan are sending states. Uzbekistan's emigrant population is the largest in Central Asia in absolute numbers. Over 2 million immigrants from Uzbekistan reportedly reside in Russia, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, South Korea, the United States, and Europe. These migrants send over \$1.3 billion home in remittances annually, making up to 8% of Uzbekistan's GDP. The real number of Uzbek migrants and the actual size of remittances is believed to be considerably

higher than reported by official sources. Roughly, 60% of Uzbek migrants work in Russia, making them one of the major immigrant communities there, alongside Ukrainians, Byelorussians, Kazakhs, and Azerbaijanis. Despite the fact that Russia is not a part of Central Asia, it cannot be excluded due to the fact that it remains a major center for migrants from the countries of the region. It is really difficult to argue about the migration system/sub-system in Central Asia as there are difficult points of view regarding this issue. Some of the Central Asian experts argue that Kazakhstan has become the hub in the regional migration sub-system.⁶

Central Asian governments were slow to develop policies to ease travel regulations for their citizens seeking work abroad or even within their own country. Uzbekistan and Turkmenistan require exit visas and restrict the internal movements of their citizens, while Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan maintain inefficient bureaucracies at passport departments and customs control, encouraging corruption and the emergence of intermediaries between migrants and authorities. Central Asian governments also make little effort to create jobs at home to reduce the need for labor migration. On the contrary, the Uzbek and Tajik governments strictly control the cotton sector to the benefit of only a few members of the government at the expense of regular workers. The governments have maintained Soviet-style central distribution of cottonseeds and technologies to farmers, but now require farmers to pay for the primary inputs, thus forcing farmers into debt. Kyrgyzstan's more economy that is open has allowed the emergence of small businesses, such as the highly successfully clothing businesses that employ tens of thousands of locals. However, in late 2008 Kyrgyzstan's President Kurmanbek Bakiyev amended the tax code so as to increase the taxes imposed on small and medium businesses by tenfold. The new regulation stifled businesses and fueled unemployment, forcing people to look for jobs abroad.

Talking about migrant-sending countries, until 2005, international organizations working in Tajikistan spent most of their efforts on the humanitarian aspects of the ongoing peace-building process. After 2005, however, the focus shifted to economic development, including efforts to facilitate labor migration. The IOM, together with the EU, Norwegian government, OSCE and UNDP, has been working with the Tajik government to enhance migrants' protection abroad and to better manage the migration system. According to the Dushanbe IOM offices, this includes giving migrants comprehensive information "on everything related to the trip and work abroad, including travel, required identity documents, registration, work permits, employment agencies, travel and employment risks – such as human trafficking and health risks – health care access, bank contacts to send remittances, contacts for help in the destination country, and others."⁷ Nearly half of all Tajik migrants work in the construction sector, another third are shuttle traders, while 6% work at oil and gas exploration sites and 6% in the agricultural sector. Only 3% work in highly professional sectors, such as education and medicine.⁸ Over two-thirds of migrants travel to Russia seasonally, with 25% working for six months, 53% for 7-12 months, and 22% for over a year. Only a small fraction of migrants remain in Russia for over three years.⁹ Most Tajik labor migrants in Russia come from rural areas, with Sogd oblast and Pamir autonomous region leading the list.

As with Tajikistan, Kyrgyzstan's economy quickly became dependent on remittances. In 2001 remittances comprised only 1.9% of GDP, but by 2005 the proportion had increased to 13.6%.¹⁰ Together the shadow economy and remittances accounted for 50-60% of GDP in 2008. At the same time foreign direct investment hovered at only 3.7% during roughly the same period. The

IOM Bishkek office reports that some 300,000 Kyrgyz migrants work in Russia, with 160,000 already possessing Russian passports. The remaining 140,000 migrants are vulnerable to deportation.¹¹ Labor migrants from Kyrgyzstan travel seasonally, returning home during winters. Other expert estimates range between 600,000 and one million Kyrgyz labor migrants traveling to Russia and Kazakhstan for work annually.

New Home for Labor Migrants

Except the European countries, Russia, Kazakhstan has also become a new home for labor migrant. Since the mid-2000s Kazakhstan has become a new popular destination for Central Asian migrants. Over 200,000 Kyrgyz, 50,000 Tajiks, and 250,000 Uzbeks worked in Kazakhstan in 2007. Although average monthly salaries are lower in Kazakhstan compared to Russia, the Kazakh government offers easier naturalization procedures for guest workers.¹² The local culture and language are similar, making communication simpler between local employers and Kyrgyz, Tajik and Uzbek migrants. However, Kazakh law is far from ideal and local law-enforcement structures habitually abuse migrants' rights. Forceful deportation of migrants is frequent. Kazakhstan is also a popular destination for Chinese, Turkish, and Indian labor migrants, and occasionally becomes a transit country for migrants from India, Bangladesh, Sri Lanka and other South Asian countries.

Although Kazakhstan is the major recipient country of labor migrants from neighboring countries, its formal regulations relate to professional immigrants, not the more numerous unskilled migrants. Each year the Statistics Agency establishes a quota for professional migrants and distributes legal work permits across various economic sectors. While realizing that unskilled labor migrants are a significant work force as well, the agency has not established a quota for such workers. 50 Unskilled labor migrants are also the most in demand in Kazakhstan, where they are simultaneously vulnerable to being deported, exploited by employers, or abused by law-enforcement personnel.

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To conclude, labor migration in Central Asia is an important phenomenon which has been increasing over the years. Regional migration system in Central Asia can be characterized as complicated and controversial. Receiving and sending countries issues need to be revised and adapted to the unfavorable and difficult conditions of reality including migrants' issues, low and slowly legislation development and really weak component of cooperation.

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