

Central Asian Labor Migrants in Russia: The "Diasporization" of the Central Asian States?

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ABSTRACT

At the turn of the 2000s, the emigration of Russians from Central Asia to Russia began to lose its relevance in comparison with the rapid development of migratory flows of Tajiks, Kyrgyz and Uzbeks. These migratory flows have complex repercussions on the societies in question, both in Russia and in Central Asia. In Central Asia's impoverished societies, the possibility to migrate and try to find a job represents a real "safety valve." Indeed, labor out-migration postpones unemployment-fueled social tension and socio-political instability. In any case, these flows will have positive as well as negative consequences for the Central Asian economies and societies. They could also have a political impact. Despite their double edge nature, these migrations confirm the emergence of new interactions between Russia and Central Asia. Their consequences could include the risk of confrontation, but also the continuation of cultural exchanges and the preservation of ethnic diversity.

Keywords • Central Asia • Migration • Russia • Diaspora • Remittances

Introduction

In the 1990s, many observers noted the waning of Russian influence in the post-Soviet space, particularly in the five states of Central Asia. These countries were actively seeking to develop new bilateral relations with other countries, especially in the Middle East and Asia. At the beginning of the 2000s, this situation changed and Russia made a pronounced comeback on the Central Asian scene, both geopolitically and economically. This comeback can be partially explained as a result of a new and somewhat understudied phenomenon: migration. Indeed, at the turn of the 2000s, the emigration of "ethnic" Russians began to lose some of its relevance in comparison with the rapid development of migratory flows of the Central Asian titular nationalities. These flows of seasonal workers have come mainly from Tajikistan, Kyrgyzstan, and

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Uzbekistan. They constitute, nowadays, the most dynamic migratory movement within the Commonwealth of Independent States (CIS). The post-Soviet space is one of the areas most subjected to large-scale internal migrations and transit flows towards other countries. Russia has, in the span of merely a few years, become second only to the United States in terms of the number of migrants it absorbs.¹ These migrations play an increasingly important economic and social role in both the host country (Russia) and in the republics of Central Asia. They also lie behind fundamental issues in the domestic and foreign policies of these countries – potentially causing a great deal of social instability. As such, the phenomenon of internal Eurasian migration gives scholars the opportunity to rethink relations between a former metropolis and its periphery in a "post-colonial" situation.

Migratory Flows from Central Asia to Russia

Russia, a New Pole of Immigration

Having been a country of emigration since the 19th century, Russia suddenly became a country of immigration in the 1990s. Between 1990 and 2003, the country took in more than 10 million people, of which almost 8 million were former Soviet citizens, working out to a yearly average of 800,000 people.² Immigration from the CIS to Russia reached a peak in 1994, with more than 1 million legal migrants. However, as early as 1996-1997, the official migratory flows between the new post-Soviet states began to decrease. Since then, "ethnic" Russians have, to a great extent, left the republics where they were settled. Furthermore, the interethnic conflicts or the civil wars in the Caucasus, Tajikistan and Moldova have been resolved or at least "frozen," and the economic and political situations seem to have stabilized. In 2004, only 74,000 people from CIS countries legally settled in Russia.³

In the 1990s, particularly in the first half of the decade, immigration to Russia was dominated by forced migrants, asylum seekers, and especially by the return of "ethnic" Russians. Out of 10 million migrants, more than half were "ethnic" Russians (60 percent) or belonged to peoples with national autonomous status in Russia (Tatars, Bashkirs, etc.). In the first half of the decade, this group represented two-thirds of total migration into Russia, but since then their share of total migration has been decreasing progressively. Moreover, this figure only includes legal

¹ See A. Mansoor, B. Quillin (ed.) *Migration and Remittances. Eastern Europe and the Former Soviet Union* (Washington DC: The World Bank, 2006).

² A. De Tinguy, *La grande migration. La Russie et les Russes depuis l'ouverture du rideau de fer* (Paris: Plon, 2004), p. 368.

³ V. Mukomel', *Migratsionnaia politika Rossii. Postsovetskie konteksty* [Russian migratory politics. Post-soviet contexts] (Moscow: Institut sotsiologii RAN, 2005), p. 50.

migrants. It thus inflates the proportion of "ethnic" Russians, who for the most part migrate with official documents, and underestimates the number of illegal workers from other former-Soviet republics. Thus, there could be 2 million Azeris, 1 million Armenians, and 500,000 Georgians working illegally in Russia. As for the number of Chinese who settled illegally, this population is the object of the most controversial appraisals, with some estimates reaching as high as 2 million people, while less alarmist figures cite 500,000 citizens of the People's Republic of China working in Russia.⁴

The Migratory Losses of Central Asia

Central Asia remains the main source of émigrés within the CIS. Of the 8 million individuals who moved to Russia from CIS republics, half of them came from one of the five Central Asian states. In 2004, migrants from Kazakhstan accounted for 35 percent of all migrants coming from the CIS to Russia, while those from the other states of Central Asia accounted for 28 percent.⁵ The relatively high birth rates of the titular populations only partially compensate for these emigration flows. Since 1989, Kazakhstan's population has decreased by nearly 3 million people, or 20 percent. In the other republics, the numbers are lower, but substantial nonetheless. At least 4 percent of Uzbekistan's population (nearly 1 million people), and 7.5 percent of Kyrgyzstan's population (nearly 360,000 people) have emigrated.⁶ Tajikistan, despite having the fastest growth in population among the former Soviet republics, still saw an 11 percent decrease in its population (694,000 people) between the censuses of 1989 and 2000.⁷ The situation appears destined to stabilize in Kazakhstan, which in 2004 posted a positive migratory balance for the first time since 1968.

During the first half of the 1990s, these migratory flows mainly concerned the national minorities of these republics, above all the Russians. Since the second half of the 1990s, migration flows from Central Asia to Russia have primarily consisted of individuals holding titular nationalities. Since 1994, the net migratory balance of each of the titular nationalities from Central Asia to Russia has been positive; however, the number of Central Asian nationals who live legally and permanently in Russia has increased only moderately between the censuses of 1989 and 2002. It rose from 882,000 to 963,000 persons,

⁴ V. Tishkov, Zh. Zaionchkovskaia and G. Vitkovskaia, *Migrations in the Countries of the Former Soviet Union* (Global Commission on International Migration, 2005), p. 38.

⁵ Mukomel, *Migratsionnaia politika Rossii*, p. 53.

⁶ R. Abazov, "Economic Migration in Post-Soviet Central Asia: The Case of Kyrgyzstan," *Post-Communist Economies* 11, 2 (1999): p. 237-252.

⁷ R. H. Rowland, "National and Regional Population Trends in Tajikistan: Results from the Recent Census," *Eurasian Geography and Economics* 46, 3 (2005), p. 202-223.

although only half of this increase can be attributed to migration. The number of Kazakhs settled in Russia increased from 636,000 to 654,000; the number of Uzbeks increased from 97,000 to 123,000; Turkmen now number only 33,000; and there are 32,000 Kyrgyz.⁸ The Tajiks have seen the highest proportional increase, from 38,000 to 120,000 people, particularly because of the forced migrant status that Russia granted to people displaced as a result of the Tajik civil war, which lasted from 1992 until 1996.

The Major Emigration Flow: Illegal Workers

These figures cannot be considered complete because they only represent people who have settled in Russia legally and on a long-term basis. As such the numbers fail to account for seasonal and/or illegal workers. In 2005, the Federation officially counted only 180,000 people from the CIS working with residence and work permits.⁹ Most experts agree that only 10 percent of foreign workers in Russia have the appropriate documents and registration with the proper authorities. By their very nature, figures for illegal immigration are particularly prone to fluctuation. Thus, Russian politicians, including President V. Putin, do not hesitate to point to a vague 10 to 15 million people. According to more modest Federal Migration Service estimates, 7-8 million people work illegally in Russia.¹⁰

Among Central Asian populations, the first migrants came from Tajikistan, fleeing difficult conditions caused by the civil war there. The Kyrgyz rapidly followed when the transition to a market economy initiated by Bishkek impoverished rural areas. In the 1990s, Uzbekistan was a country of immigration, in particular receiving refugees from Afghanistan and Tajikistan. At the end of the decade however, the situation changed and the country also became a supplier of migrants, who followed the same routes that Tajiks and Kyrgyz had in previous years. Very few Central Asian migrants have the appropriate documents and registration. According to official figures, Tajikistan sent only 16,800 workers to Russia, Uzbekistan 16,100, and Kyrgyzstan 30,000 in 2002. Even official figures augmented rapidly. Thus, in 2006, the Federal Migration Service counted 102,000 Uzbeks with permission to work in

⁸ J. Radvanyi, "Quelques réponses à une question non posée : l'islam et le recensement de la population de Russie en 2002" [Some answers to questions not asked: Islam and the 2002 Russian census], in M. Laruelle, S. Peyrouse (ed.), *Islam et politique en ex-URSS* (Paris: L'Harmattan, 2005), pp. 159-169.

⁹ Tishkov, Zaionchkovskaia and Vitkovskaia, *Migrations in the Countries of the Former Soviet Union*, p. 25.

¹⁰ See "Les migrants en Russie. Des populations fragilisées, premières victimes des crises politiques internes et externes," (International Federation for Human Rights, Paris, no. 472, April 2007), p. 17.

Russia.¹¹ In reality, the actual number for all five republics is estimated at 2 million: approximately 800,000 Tajiks, sometimes more according to the season; 500,000 Kyrgyz; and almost 1 million Uzbeks. In 2005, the Uzbek NGO, Tong Jahoni, reported that the total number of Uzbek migrants in Russia numbered at least 800,000.¹²

A very large majority of all Central Asian migrants work in Russia. This seems natural, since the Russian Federation has the most dynamic economy in the region and one can earn salaries five to twenty times larger there than in Central Asia. In addition, Russia does not require post-Soviet citizens to have a visa, with the exception of those from Georgia and Turkmenistan. A knowledge of the Russian language and the common Soviet past enables the migrants to remain inside a familiar cultural space. Networks that facilitate emigration are also more developed, since the Russian market for produce from Central Asia and the Caucasus was already established during the Soviet period. Yet, since the early 2000s, Russia is no longer the only country that attracts large numbers of Central Asian migrants; Kazakhstan has also become an attractive destination country. Its economic development enables it to absorb some of the workers from neighboring countries, such as Kyrgyzstan and Uzbekistan. The unidirectional nature of migration towards Russia is particularly marked in Tajikistan. 97 percent of Tajik migrants work in Russia, but only 1.4 percent in Kyrgyzstan and 0.7 percent in Kazakhstan. In the other republics, the flows are more complex. Only half of Kyrgyz migrants work in Russia, while the other half are in Kazakhstan. About 70 percent of Uzbek migrants work in Russia, but tens of thousands of them have also settled in Kazakhstan or even outside the CIS, particularly in South Korea.¹³ One can also notice the existence of the flow of jobs across borders on a small scale. In the Ferghana valley, for example, Uzbeks recruited from day labor markets are authorized by the Uzbek authorities to go to building sites in Tajikistan for five days without a visa.¹⁴

¹¹ M. Vorob'ev, "Rossiia i Uzbekistan pytaiutsia stat' polnotsennymi ekonomicheskimi partnerami," [Russia and Uzbekistan try to become economic partners with one another], *CentrAsia*, March 12, 2007, <<http://www.centrasia.ru/newsA.php4?st=1173671880>> (May 18 2007).

¹² Quoted by A. Ilkhamov, "Geographic mobility of Uzbeks: the emergence of crossnational communities vs. Nation-state control," Paper Prepared for NBR Conference on "Generational Change and Leadership Succession in Uzbekistan" March 2, 2006, Washington D.C., <www.nbr.org/programs/eurasia/Ilkhamov.pdf> (June 1 2007), p. 7.

¹³ *Ibid.*, p. 4.

¹⁴ D. Kimmage, "Uzbekistan: Migrating To Make Ends Meet," *RFE/RL*, August 2005, <www.rferl.org/featuresarticle/2005/08/92b91bf8-3979-4b77-8d85-014d27b4b1e6.html> (April 12 2007).

Sociology of the Migrants, Sociology of Poverty?

The Sociological Profile of the Migrant

Migrants develop different family structures depending on whether they are settling for a long time, even illegally, or whether they work seasonally. Thus, Chinese, Vietnamese, and Afghan migrants who have settled in Russia are mostly accompanied by their families and they settle for the long term, while Central Asian migrants essentially seem to look for temporary work and, as a result, stay in Russia alone. About 200,000 Tajiks have nonetheless settled permanently in the Federation, while others work irregularly or seasonally. The average migrant is a young married male with a secondary education. In Central Asia, two age groups seem to be particularly subjected to migrations: young people in their twenties, who have to pay for a wedding or the building of a house; and older men in their forties or fifties, who need more sporadic financing for family celebrations such as children's weddings, circumcisions, or the extension of the family property. In Tajikistan, 90 percent of migrants are men. A quarter of them are between the ages of 18 and 29, another quarter are between 40 and 49, and those from 30 to 39 represent 40 percent of the total number of migrants.¹⁵

The older generation is statistically more educated and generally has a good command of the Russian language. As a result of this, they find better and more skilled labour. The youngest ones are less skilled, have a poor command of Russian, and get low-paying jobs – particularly in the building trade. More than 18 percent of Tajik migrants have completed higher education, 28 percent have completed an average specialized education, and 34 percent have completed an average general education.¹⁶ In the 1990s, migration appeared to affect the rural population less than it did others, relatively speaking. They were traditionally less mobile, as agricultural work requires a year round presence, and their mutual aid networks in the host countries were not very developed.¹⁷ Today, migratory flows originating from rural areas largely dominate. Likewise, sociological surveys signal the rapid feminization of Central Asian migration to Russia. This feminization is not attributable simply to the development of human trafficking, as prostitution is mainly directed at countries outside the CIS, but to the need for a low-skilled workforce in

¹⁵ A. Erlich, "Tajikistan: From Refugee Sender to Labor Exporter," *Migration Information Source*, <<http://www.migrationinformation.org/Profiles/display.cfm?ID=411>> (May 22 2007).

¹⁶ S. Olimova, "Migratsionnye protsessy v sovremennom Tadjikistane," [The migration processes in contemporary Tajikistan] *Demoskop Weekly*, October 2005, <www.demoscope.ru/weekly/2005/0223/analito5.php> (April 13 2007).

¹⁷ S. Soboleva, O. Chudaeva. "Inostrannye migranty na rossiiskom rynke truda," [Foreign migrants on their way to work in Russia], in *Migratsia i natsional'naia bezopasnost'*, pp. 90-104.

Russia, with female migrants taking jobs as waitresses, shop assistants, cleaning ladies, and day care workers.

The Geographic Origin of the Migrants

In Kyrgyzstan, migrants mostly come from the poorer, southern regions. In May 2006 the head of the Kyrgyz parliamentary Committee on Labor Migration, Kubanychbek Isabekov, admitted that the regional economies of Osh, Djalal-Abad, and Batken were doing so poorly that almost 70 percent of the population had to look for a job outside the country, mainly in Russia and in Kazakhstan.¹⁸ According to Mr. Isabekov, almost 90 percent of the 300,000 migrants (the figure officially recognized by the Kyrgyz government) came from the southern regions of the country, and only 10 percent came from northern regions like Bishkek, Kant, and the area of Issyk-Kul. The situation is similar in Tajikistan, where migrants mostly come from the mountainous regions, since the agricultural plains offer more opportunities for employment. Since the middle of the 1990s, more than 80 percent of the young men from Pamir have migrated for work.¹⁹ The mountainous nature of the two poorest republics, Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan—where almost 90 percent of the territory lies at an altitude above 1,500 meters—works in favor of these massive migrations. In Uzbekistan, where agriculture provides a livelihood for a majority of the population, migrants come mostly from the Ferghana valley. Though fertile and irrigated, the valley is overpopulated and more than half of its population, particularly young people, are unemployed. Some migrants also come from the poor southern provinces of Surkhandaria and Kashkhadaria.²⁰

The Geographic Distribution of Migration in Russia

The Russian region with the most illegal migrants is Moscow, which absorbed at least 1 million illegal workers.²¹ Second to Moscow is the central region of Centr, which absorbed nearly a third of all migrants. Southern regions like Krasnodar and Stavropol follow, experiencing a rise in the number of migrants due to the deterioration of the situation in

¹⁸ "A Kyrgyz lawmaker today said that the number of people seeking jobs abroad has reached alarming proportions," *RFE/RL*, May 31 2006, <www.rferl.org/featuresarticle/2006/05/A1D6201D-A78B-4F4F-A692-2AA44C05AAE5.html> (May 30 2007).

¹⁹ S. Olimova, "Protsess suverenizatsii strany i migratsionnye protsessy v Tadjikistane," [Sovereignization and the migration process from Tajikistan] in *Zh. Zaionchkovskaia. Migratsionnaia situatsia v stranakh SNG* [The migration situation in the CIS countries] (Moscow: Kompleks – Progress, 1999), p. 230.

²⁰ Kimmage, "Uzbekistan: Migrating To Make Ends Meet".

²¹ On the situation in Moscow, see A. V. Dmitriev, *Migratsia. Konfliktnoe izmerenie* [Migrations. The conflictual dimension] (Moscow: Al'fa-M, 2006), pp. 231-269.

the Northern Caucasus and Transcaucasus.²² While migrants from other post-Soviet republics mostly settle in the cities of European Russia, Central Asian migrants mainly go to the countryside and to Siberia, a sign of their low skill level.²³ The main Kyrgyz community in Russia is settled in Yekaterinburg and engages in the trade of Chinese products.²⁴ As for the Uzbeks, they make up the majority of illegal immigrants in Barnaul. A city in the Altay *krai*, Barnaul has a reputation for salaries which are low in comparison to those in other provincial Russian cities.²⁵

Half of the Tajik migrants in Russia are based in Moscow, while 14 percent have settled in Siberia, and 10 percent in the Volga-Ural regions. The largest communities have settled in sizeable provincial towns such as Yekaterinburg, Tiumen, Surgut, Novosibirsk, Novokuznets and Krasnoiarisk. In these heavily industrialized regions, Tajiks are employed in oil and gas firms, as well as in chemical factories. Migrants with relatives who moved to the agricultural sector at the beginning of the civil war try to settle, according to these networks, in the most agricultural regions. Few Central Asian migrants settle in the autonomous ethnic republics of the Russian Federation, which are perceived as pockets reserved for the titular nationalities. Central Asian migrants thus prefer to settle in Russian regions. The only exceptions to this are the republics of Tatarstan and Bashkortostan, which seem to be relatively attractive destinations for the Turkic-speaking migrants, perhaps because of their linguistic and cultural links²⁶. Moreover, one can notice that the Tajiks are starting to migrate toward Afghanistan, as that country has a significant need for educated migrants, especially from the fields of medicine, technology, and engineering.²⁷

The Professional Distribution of the Migrants

The labor market for illegal migrants is separate from that which is reserved for citizens and legal migrants. Low wages, difficult working conditions, and jobs with little prestige do not attract Russian citizens

²² Zh. Zaionchkovskaya, "Rynok truda kak reguliator migratsionnykh potokov," in G. Vitkovskaia (ed.). *Migratsia i rynki truda v postsovetskoï Rossii* [Migration and the labor market in post-Soviet Russia] (Moscow: Carnegie, 1998), p. 13.

²³ I. N. Molodikova and N. N. Nozdrina, "Prichiny i geografia migratsii v Rossii," [Causes and patterns of migrations in Russia] in *Migratsionnaia situatsia v stranakh SNG*, p. 147.

²⁴ N. Zotova, "V Moskve sozdana novaia organizatsiia dlia pomoshchi migrantam iz Srednei Azii," [A new aid organization for Central Asia migrants created in Moscow], Ferghana.ru, January 12 2007, <<http://www.ferghana.ru/article.php?id=4830>> (May 3 2007).

²⁵ Iu. Guzhvenko, "Podavliaiushchee bol'shinstvo trudovykh migrantov v Barnaule – uzbeki," [The vast majority of migrant laborers in Barnaul are Uzbeks], Ferghana.ru, October 9 2006, <<http://www.ferghana.ru/article.php?id=4629>> (May 3 2007).

²⁶ V. Lunin, "Tatarstanu nuzhny trudospobnyye migranty – kvalifitsirovannye rabochie," [Tatarstan needs skilled, qualified migrants], Ferghana.ru, April 26 2007, <<http://www.ferghana.ru/article.php?id=5090>> (May 3 2007).

²⁷ Olimova, "Migratsionnye protsessy v sovremennom Tadjikistane".

and thus create many vacancies. These vacancies cannot be filled through official immigration quotas, which are not large enough to compensate for the labor shortages. Indeed, almost one-third of Russian firms would face labor shortages without migration, particularly in industrial regions in crisis, like the Urals.²⁸ Thus, they recruit many illegal migrants, especially during the spring and summer months, when open-air sites are at peak of their operations. The recruitment of migrants by these companies creates tensions between employers and the local administrative services, which want firms to hire local staff. However, wages are so low in these regions (from US\$100 to US\$200 per month) that few Russian citizens would agree to work.²⁹ Thus, the migrants fill roles that Russians have cast off. According to the group "Delovaia Rossia," which represents Russian small businesses, foreigners account for 40 percent of construction workers, 30 percent of shuttle trade workers, 7 percent of agricultural workers, and 4 percent of transport workers.³⁰

More than half of the migrants coming from Central Asia work on building sites in the construction sector, and suffer from particularly difficult living and working conditions. One-third of them have jobs in "ethnic businesses" like transportation and trade—for example in produce from Central Asia, or everyday goods, textiles and tools from China, all passing through Central Asia *en route* to Russia. Consequently, Central Asian migrants dominate this sphere of activity, although Russians from the Southern republics also play an important role. The spheres of activity least favored by migrants are agriculture (though it remains the favorite sector of Uzbeks and Kyrgyz working in Kazakhstan), and the business services industry (particularly within the field of oil production). Only 6 percent of Central Asian migrants work in each of these two areas. Nonetheless, the position of Central Asians in Russian agriculture seems to be on the rise. Their skills in this sector combined with the desire of Russian citizens to leave the rural areas in favour of work in urban centres encourage this trend. Thus, close to 70

²⁸ Ivankhniuk and R. Daurov, "Nezakonnaia migratsia i bezopasnost' Rossii: ugrozy, vyzovy, riski," [Illegal migration and Russian security: threats, issues and risks], in *Migratsia i natsional'naia bezopasnost'* [Migration and national security] (Moscow: Maks Press, 2003), p. 34.

²⁹ Z. Ibragimov, "Ferghana valley's unemployed feed a thirsty russian labor market," *Eurasianet.org*, March 10 2003, <www.eurasianet.org/departments/business/articles/eav100302.shtml> (May 15 2007).

³⁰ N. Zotova, "Trudovaia migratsia v Rossii i stranakh SNG: tendentsii, problemy i puti sotrudnichestva," [Labor migration in Russia and the CIS countries: trends, problems, and avenues for cooperation], *Ferghana.ru*, May 16 2007, <<http://www.ferghana.ru/article.php?id=5138>> (May 30 2007).

percent of agricultural workers in Astrakhan and Volgograd come from Central Asia.³¹

The Deterioration of Transportation Conditions

The number of airline flights between Russia and the capitals of Central Asia doubled in the 1990s, confirming the importance of the economic relationship between the two areas.³² However, this mode of transportation remains much too expensive for the majority of migrants. In the 1990s, most of them arrived in Russia by train, a journey that cost no more than US\$300. Currently, the pauperization of some social strata in Tajikistan, Uzbekistan and Kyrgyzstan compels many Central Asian migrants to use buses, as rail and air travel have become increasingly inaccessible.³³ Thus, transit conditions on trips that can last several days are exhausting and are further complicated by racketeering schemes organized by the customs services at the borders. These difficult circumstances are exacerbated by poor bilateral relations between the Central Asian states. In 2001, authorities in Astana refused to allow the Astrakhan-Dushanbe train to pass through because of the number of illegal Tajik migrants who could get off along the way on Kazakh territory. Since the Tajik civil war, Uzbekistan has also blocked the railway line that once connected Tashkent and Dushanbe, and has demanded a transit visa for Tajik citizens on their way to Russia. Tajikistan, in particular, thus suffers as a result of being surrounded by unfriendly states which impose strict transit visa regulations.

The Legal and Social Difficulties Resulting from the Migrants' Unlawful Status

Illegal migrants working in Russia live in extremely difficult conditions and do not benefit from legal protection. The general political situation in the Federation does not allow them to be helped by the public administration or NGOs responsible for defending workers rights. Indeed, Lydia Grafova's Forum of Migrants' Organizations was suspended in 2006, like many other associations that the Kremlin considered too favorable to Caucasian migrants. Moreover, Russia has

³¹ N. Zotova, "Pochti sem'desiat protsentov sel'khokul'tur Astrakhanskoi i Volgogradskoi oblastei vyrashchivaetsia migrantami iz Srednei Azii," [Close to 70 percent of agriculture in Astrakhan and Volgograd is cultivated by Central Asian migrants], Ferghana.ru, September 13 2006,

<<http://www.ferghana.ru/article.php?id=4590>> (May 10 2007).

³² J. Thorez, "Itinéraires du déracinement. L'essor des migrations de travail entre l'Asie centrale et la Russie," *Espace, population et sociétés*, 1 (2007).

³³ M. Mansur, "Uzbekistan: Migrants Suffer Russian Humiliation," May 24 2002, Institute for War and Peace reporting web site,

<www.iwpr.net/?p=rca&s=f&o=176446&apc_state=henirca2002> (April 12 2007).

implemented an ambiguous and contradictory migration policy, mainly conceived in a reactive, rather than proactive, manner. Since the beginning of the 2000s, the Russian authorities have acknowledged that the country has begun to experience a demographic crisis. Russia will lose a million people in the next twenty years. The rapid aging of the population creates a substantial labor shortage, which has already been noticeable for several years in certain sectors. Some experts estimate that 3 million (mostly low-wage) jobs could be filled in Russia. Finance Minister, Aleksei Kudrin, has even openly acknowledged that the country would have to legalize migrants *en masse* in order to maintain the development of its economy. On several occasions, President Vladimir Putin cited the importance he places on migrants from the post-Soviet republics who share Russian culture and have a command of the Russian language, adding that they could be among the first to benefit, along with the "ethnic" Russians, from the migration policy of the Federation.³⁴ However, since public opinion is mostly hostile to opening the border, and the Russian political elites remain divided on the issue, Russia does not presently have a coherent policy concerning migration.

Economic Exploitation without Any Legal Protection

Central Asian migrants are completely vulnerable to the arbitrary whims of their employers in Russia. They suffer from the absence of decent housing, the lack of access to hygiene (unhealthy groups of huts, disused carriages, etc.), exhausting work conditions on building sites plagued by industrial accidents, the absence of any work contracts that would make it difficult for employers to fire migrants without notice, the regular refusal to pay wages, and a quasi systematic lack of health insurance. On top of this, the police forces are often corrupt, and exploit the migrant's illegal status in order to extort money from them. The migrants cannot try to secure better living and working conditions because they send the vast majority of their wages back to their countries of origin. They also are increasingly forced to rely on companies that specialize in sending seasonal workers to Russia. These labor traffickers help migrants who do not have sufficient networks to find work on their own, but they also raise the cost of migration due to the fees they charge. In these conditions, many migrants are forced to become involved in illegal activities in order to accumulate large sums of money quickly. This only contributes to the sentiment among Russians that illegal immigrants from Central Asia and the Caucasus work alongside mafia networks.³⁵

³⁴ M. Laruelle, "La question des Russes du proche-étranger en Russie (1991-2006)", *Étude du CERI*, 126 (2006).

³⁵ See for instance Iu. Latov, O. Vykhovanec (ed.), *Nelegal'naia migratsia v sovremennoi Rossii* [*The illegal migrations in contemporary Russia*] (Moscow: RGGU, 2006).

Daily Xenophobia and Racist Murders

In such conditions, the death rate of Central Asian migrants in Russia has reached significant heights. In 2005, the Tajik Interior Ministry had to recognize that 246 Tajik citizens had died in Russia: 115 from disease, 99 from accidents, and 36 from murder. According to unofficial figures, between 600 and 700 Tajiks die in Russia every year. To this phenomenon one can add the worrisome rise of xenophobia within Russian society.³⁶ Sociological studies carried out on this subject confirm that a major part of the Russian population believes that Russia takes in too many foreigners. This same segment of the population maintains that migrants from Central Asia and the Caucasus should not benefit from preferential conditions that allow them to settle in Russia, even though they are former Soviet citizens. As a result, racism has now become an integral part of the everyday life of Central Asian migrants. They face discrimination in the housing market, unfair treatment when attempting to access social services, and repeated insults. According to a study conducted in 2003, 70 percent of Tajik migrants limit their time in public to travel to and from work and home.³⁷ Migrants often worry about this deterioration of interethnic relations between former Soviet peoples. Moreover, skinhead movements, which recruit heavily in certain provincial towns and in the two capitals, Moscow and St. Petersburg, have drawn attention to themselves on several occasions due to their attacks against "Southerners." The SOVA Center, an analytical center that conducts sociological research on development of nationalism and racism in modern Russia, reported 520 such racist attacks in 2006, of which 54 were deadly.³⁸ These increasingly violent attacks, supported by far-right groups, are essentially organized pogroms. They often lead to the death of the victims, many of whom are Tajiks, Kazakhs, or Kyrgyz. One of the latest pogroms, on August 21, 2006, resulted in the death of twelve people in the market of Cherkizovo, including four Tajik nationals.

Lack of Mechanisms to Legalize the Migrants

The administrative complexity of regulatory procedures in Russia does not encourage companies to apply to the Federal Migration Service on behalf of their foreign employees. Russian legislation on naturalization, work permits, and residence permits is particularly complex and thus

³⁶ See "Les migrants en Russie. Des populations fragilisées, premières victimes des crises politiques internes et externes," (International Federation for Human Rights, Paris, no. 472, April 2007).

³⁷ S. Zaurbekov, "Nekotorye osobennosti tadjzhikskoi trudovoi migratsii v Rossiiu," [Some specificities of Tajik labor migration in Russia], Ferghana.ru, February 21 2007, <<http://www.ferghana.ru/article.php?id=4928>> (April 30 2007).

³⁸ For more information, see their web site, <http://xeno.sova-center.ru>.

discourages migrants from seeking legal work status. The compulsory registration (*propiska*) is so difficult to obtain in Moscow, St. Petersburg, and other Russian cities that it compels migrants to remain outside the law. This legal situation has worsened since 2001, when the Federal Migration Service came under the jurisdiction of the Interior Ministry, which is characterized by a political culture which does not support legalization in favor of migrants.

Since 2006, the Russian authorities have become aware of the importance of regulating migratory flows, and accordingly they passed legislation which aims to select immigrants. The new law on migrants was voted on July 18, 2006, and entered into effect on January 15, 2007. It reduces the requirements for registration and obtaining a work permit for those migrants who cross, or crossed, the border legally. It does not, however, normalize those already present on Russian territory without formal status. More than 700,000 foreigners received work permits in 2006 – a number which remains small compared to the millions of illegal immigrants living in Russia.³⁹ Due to this law, the Russian authorities now have the right to establish quotas for economic migrants coming from countries that do not need visas to enter Russia: for 2007, their number is fixed at 6 million. Since April 1, 2007, another law concerning the limitation on the number of foreigners in bazaars and retail commerce entered into effect. Its objective clearly seems to be to calm the xenophobic worries of the majority of Russian citizens regarding Central Asians and Caucasians working in the small business sector.

Some Initial Legal Improvements

The difficult situation faced by migrants in Russia can only be improved through bilateral or multilateral agreements between the states supplying the migrants and those receiving them. In Central Asia, Uzbekistan has refused to recognize the scale of the migratory phenomenon and its major economic role. Consequently, this country has not tried to reach any diplomatic agreement with Russia on the issue. The State Agency for Labor Out-Migration is the only institution with the right to organize the migration of Uzbek citizens. In 2005, new restrictions on travel to Russia were introduced, and since then Uzbek workers have been forced to obtain exit visas to travel to Russia.⁴⁰ Only Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan have attempted to set up legal mechanisms to facilitate this migration and to protect their nationals once they are settled in Russia. As

³⁹ F. Dzhani, "Rossiia: novye pravila dlia torgovtsev-inostrantsev kak 'fors-mazhorne obstoiatel'stva'," [Russia: new rules for foreign vendors presented as 'a case of major importance'] January 16 2007, *Ferghana.ru*, <<http://www.ferghana.ru/article.php?id=4847>> (May 4 2007).

⁴⁰ A. Ilkhamov, "Geographic mobility of Uzbeks: the emergence of crossnational communities vs. Nation-state control," p. 19.

Tajikistan was the first state to experience the phenomenon on a large scale in the 1990s, it managed to open some initial negotiations on the matter, due to its close economic and security links to Russia (the 201st Russian armed division guarded the Tajik-Afghan border until 2005).

As early as 2000, the Tajik government asked the Russian authorities to sign a bilateral agreement in order to protect Tajik nationals and force Russian employers to ensure decent living and working conditions for Tajik workers.⁴¹ In 2002, Dushanbe approved a multi-year program aimed at regulating its migrants. However, Russian-Tajik relations on issues related to migration are not always good. In 2003, for example, Moscow caused an uproar by returning one hundred Tajik seasonal workers to their home country. However, Russia quickly returned to its previous position and announced that it wanted to favor more open labor immigration. In 2004, the Duma passed a law on social protection for Tajik migrants, which was supposed to facilitate their legalization and give them access to health insurance. The legislation of post-Soviet countries is nonetheless becoming more complex, which does a disservice to the migrants. Since July 2005, for example, internal passports do not allow their holders to pass through the borders of the countries of the CIS. Instead, one must have a visa or an international passport, which can be particularly costly – particularly for impoverished segments of the population. In December 2005, the Duma approved a new text according to which Kyrgyz and Tajik labor migrants could enter Russia with only their external passport (except for those coming by train, since Uzbekistan and Kazakhstan demand a transit visa). The Duma's document caused violent opposition from the Russian nationalist parties, in particular the Liberal Democratic Party of Russia of Vladimir Zhirinovskii and the parliamentary fraction Rodina. The Tajik government went back on its decision, and again required a compulsory international passport from its migrants.⁴²

Despite the presence of legal complexities, it seems that migrants have begun to organize themselves in order to collectively defend their rights. The Tajiks were the first to do so. For several years, many organizations, among them the "Tajikistan Fund" directed by Garvkhar Dzhuraeva and "Inson," directed by Muzaffar Zaripov, offer consultative, legal, health, and psychological services to migrants.⁴³ Since

⁴¹ N. Zokirova, "Tajikistan: Treaty Boosts Migrant Workers," August 13 2003, Institute for War and Peace reporting web site,

<www.iwpr.net/?p=rca&s=f&o=175247&apc_state=henirca2003> (April 2 2007).

⁴² A. Fradchuk, "Tajik authorities withdraw a major concession for migrant workers in Russia shortly after announcing it," December 5 2005, *Spero News*, <<http://www.speroforum.com/site/article.asp?id=2239>> (May 21 2007).

⁴³ Zotova N, "Regional'nyi obshchestvennyi fond 'Tadzhikistan' aktivno pomogaet migrantam v Rossii otstaiivat' svoi prava," [The regional association "Tajikistan" actively

2002, these two groups have published the journal *Migratsia i pravo*. In 2006, a new organization, Centrasia, was created. It aims mainly to assist Kyrgyz migrants, but also supports the activities of other Central Asian interest groups, particularly among the Uzbeks.⁴⁴

The Economic and Social Impact of Migration in Central Asia

During Soviet times Central Asia was characterized by one of the lowest rates of out-migration inside Soviet Union. The post-Soviet development of this region drives major social changes, as these previously immobile societies become diasporas. The disappearance of the industrial fabric of the republics and the regular increase in unemployment cause Central Asians to look to emigration as one of the only routes to exit poverty. Established strategies therefore move from the individual to the group. Very frequently families, the mahalla or village support the migratory departure of young men and finance the trip.

Economies that Cannot Function Without Migrants

In the Soviet era, the republics of Central Asia benefited the most from the distribution of Soviet incomes on the financial, technical and human levels. The impoverishment of the new states has thus been a crucial factor explaining these migratory flows, and presently Kazakhstan is the only Central Asian country that appears to have emerged from the post-Soviet economic crisis.⁴⁵ Therefore it is no coincidence that the countries now experiencing the biggest migratory flows—Tajikistan, Kyrgyzstan and Uzbekistan—are also the countries with the smallest GDP, highest rates of unemployment, and most substantial birth rates. Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan, which remain the poorest republics in Central Asia, have particularly weak economies for which the remittances from migratory work constitute an essential cash inflow. Both countries are listed among the poorest in the world, with a GNP per capita of close to US\$350 per year. According to UN data, more than 60 percent of the population of Tajikistan lives below the poverty line, subsisting on less than a dollar per day.⁴⁶ In Kyrgyzstan, where this figure is about 50 percent, many rural areas still remain on the edge of economic suffocation. For example, almost 90 percent of the population of the Naryn region lives below the poverty line. For Tajikistan, with a workforce estimated at less than 2

helps migrants to Russia defend their rights] December 8 2006, Ferghana.ru, <<http://www.ferghana.ru/article.php?id=4773>> (May 3 2007).

⁴⁴ "V Moskve sozdana novaia organizatsia dlia pomoshchi migrantam iz Srednei Azii," [A new aid organization for Central Asian migrants is created in Moscow] January 12 2007, Ferghana.ru, <<http://www.ferghana.ru/article.php?id=4830>> (May 3 2007).

⁴⁵ See the Central Asia Human Development Report 2005, <http://europeandcis.undp.org/index.cfm?wspc=CAHDR2005_ru>.

⁴⁶ *Ibid.*

million people, migrants are crucial, since they represent about half of the entire working age population. The figures are almost the same in Kyrgyzstan. There, almost 10 percent of its citizens migrate for work, which is equal to about 20 percent of the male population. One-third of all Kyrgyz families depend directly on the income sent by migrants. In Tajikistan, at least one household in four includes a migrant.⁴⁷

The Importance of Remittances

Detailed facts and figures concerning remittances are difficult to obtain, since local banks do not release information concerning financial transfers from Russia to the countries of Central Asia. In addition, a good part of this money circulates informally. For the three countries in question—Tajikistan, Kyrgyzstan, and Uzbekistan—the total amount of these transfers is valued at US\$4 billion per year.⁴⁸ According to the IMF, the remittances from Tajik migrants will soon reach US\$1 billion, a sum equal to almost 50 percent of the Tajik GDP.⁴⁹ These figures indicate that this country is possibly more dependent on remittances than any other country in the world, even more so than the countries of Central America. In Kyrgyzstan, the figures are similar. According to Isabekov, each Kyrgyz worker sends an average of US\$100 per month, and sometimes more to his family. The total amount of remittances would equal at least the annual budget of the country, which is less than US\$500 million. In total, these 500,000 migrants directly finance more than 1 million citizens out of the 5 million living in Kyrgyzstan.

One of the economic issues faced by the Central Asian countries is the capacity of the state to receive a part of this financial inflow in order to incorporate it into its budget and eventually redistribute it. With the notable exception of Tajikistan and Kazakhstan, the other countries of Central Asia do not have any effective system for bank transfers. In 2001, the Tajik government decided to impose a 30 percent tax on remittances. Migrants have preferred to conduct these transfers in cash to avoid paying this tax – however personally transporting this money increases the risks of corruption at customs and the dangers of extortion during travel. However, for several years banks specializing in transfers, like Western Union, have multiplied in the post-Soviet space, and increasingly facilitate secure monetary transfers. In addition, the Tajik

⁴⁷ See the remarks made by M. Naderi, the representative of the International Organisation for Migration in Tadjikistan, IOM Web site, September 8 2006, <<http://www.iom.int/jahia/Jahia/pbnEU/cache/offonce/lang/fr?entryId=10647>> (April 20 2007).

⁴⁸ Tishkov, Zaionchkovskaia and Vitkovskaia, *Migrations in the Countries of the Former Soviet Union*, p. 28.

⁴⁹ A. Kireyev. "The Macroeconomics of Remittances: The Case of Tajikistan", *International Monetary Fond Working Paper* (Washington: IMF, 2006), p. 4.

government has been working for several years with the UNDP to optimize these incomes and combine them with projects sponsored by the international funds to support local infrastructure and micro-credit.⁵⁰ The Kyrgyz authorities have recognized that this financial contribution was beneficial to the country: it contributed to improving Kyrgyz economy, particularly because of the investments made by migrants in sectors such as agriculture.

The Social Impact of Migrations on the Central Asian Societies

According to a study conducted by the International Organization for Migration in 2003, the money saved by migrants and sent back to their countries of origin was used by only a quarter of the families to finance everyday life purchases. The remaining three quarters of the families put the money towards the building of a house, the purchase of a car, the financing of their childrens' education, or to establish a private business. In Central Asia, almost 70 percent of remittances are sent to rural areas, while in the other countries of the former USSR, such as the Caucasus, they are mostly sent to urban areas. Thus, the social transformations caused by these massive migrations are significant. Among other potential benefits, the transfer of funds ensures a regular source of income, creates a rise in the domestic demand for goods, supports economic growth, and broadens possibilities for investment. The Tajik and Kyrgyz governments admit that migrations allow for improvements in human capital. Migrants return with new training, expertise, and linguistic knowledge that they cannot acquire in their home countries. This also indirectly compensates for the disappearance of an efficient school system in Central Asian rural regions.

Among the negative aspects, the "brain drain" should be mentioned, as should the surge in prices. For example, in Dushanbe some migrants returning from Russia have above-average standards of living – this alters the balance of prices, especially in the real-estate market.⁵¹ These massive migrations also have an important impact as a result of the loss of workforce. From April to November, villages become empty, commerce in markets drops, prices fall, and marriages are postponed until the fall. One also notes the critical absence of students from technical schools.⁵² The disappearance of so many men in villages and small towns creates a

⁵⁰ E. Trouth Hofmann and C. Buckley, "The Value of Remittances. Effects of Labor Migration on Families in Tajikistan," Paper read at the *Annual Convention of the Association for Study of Nationalities (ASN)*, New-York, Columbia University, April 12-14 2007.

⁵¹ Personal remarks from the field, Dushanbe, June 2004.

⁵² D. Sulaiman, "Sezon nachalsia: uzbekskie trudovye migranty otpravilis' za rubezh," [The season began: Uzbek migrants depart for abroad] May 31 2007, Ferghana.ru, <<http://www.ferghana.ru/article.php?id=5160>> (June 3 2007).

labor shortage, intensifies the lack of small shopkeepers, and has a detrimental impact on the agricultural industry, since the migratory flows are most intense during the harest months. Migration also has a complex impact on the position of women in society. As it happens, women remain alone in their home countries with elderly persons and children. They become the managers of the households and obtain a certain autonomy in the daily management of family life. At the same time, they suffer the repercussions of a strong decline in their already low living standards, since they must often cope with unforeseen economic events of their own. They are increasingly subjected to polygamy and the principle of the "extended family," principally due to the decreasing male population. Many migrants start their lives over again in Russia, marrying other women and ceasing to finance their family members in Central Asia. In societies traditionally defined by patriarchal structures, the absence of fathers and husbands will likely lead to significant long-term cultural consequences.

Conclusion

These migratory flows have complex repercussions on the societies in question, both in Russia and in Central Asia. The economic development of the Russian Federation benefits from these migratory flows, which compensate for the aging population and the labor shortage. Yet, xenophobic tensions may lead to a serious destabilization. Despite the arrival of several million "ethnic" Russians in the country since the 1990s, the percentage of ethnic Russians has decreased between the two censuses, from 81.5 percent in 1989 to 79.8 percent in 2002. The changes in the ethnic urban landscape caused by the arrival of migrants on a large scale—whether they come from the former Soviet republics or from the "far abroad"—are being exploited by Russian nationalist movements in order to radicalize the population in their favor. Hence, the Russian Federation experiences the same processes as Western European countries, whose migratory policies waver between the pragmatic acknowledgement of an inescapable economic necessity to accept more migrants, and the nationalist phobias brought about by social and ethnic diversity.

For the three states of Central Asia confronted with these massive migratory flows, the stakes seem to be even higher. In impoverished societies, for which the disappearance of the Soviet Union has above all signified the decrease of living standards, the possibility to migrate to try to find a job represents a real "safety valve." Today, the Tajik and Kyrgyz governments seem to be well aware that the political stability of their countries depends on these migrations; and that it is in their interest to accept the resulting social impact, and to legally control and politically

defend these migratory movements. Indeed, labor out-migration postpones unemployment-fueled social tension and socio-political instability. Uzbekistan is, for the moment, the sole republic that refuses to acknowledge its difficult social situation, particularly in the Ferghana valley. In any case, these flows will have positive as well as negative consequences for the Central Asian economies and societies. Migration could also have an important political impact: the populations that regularly go to Russia have access to a society which, though far from being democratic, nonetheless constitutes a model of development for the countries of Central Asia. Despite their double-edged nature, these migrations confirm the emergence of new interactions between Russia and Central Asia. Their consequences could conceivably include the risks of some confrontations but also the maintenance of some cultural exchanges and the preservation of a certain ethnic diversity. Thus, the former imperial power continues to play a stabilizing role by absorbing a part of the economic and social current difficulties of Central Asia.