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A REVISIONIST OVERVIEW OF THE CENTRAL ASIAN MIGRATORY SUBSYSTEM

Faculty of Political Science and Sociology



Author: David Bermejo Salvadó

Tutor: Francesc Serra Massansalvador

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Introduction

The present work pretends to study the migratory movements from Central Asian Republics towards the Russian Federation, with the focus put on identifying historical conditions and causes but also focusing on the evolution of contemporary events, with the eventual aim of understanding the role of the different actors and structures implicated in the process, from the state to the individual level. Initially, this work was intended to deepen into ethno-national identities in the post-Soviet regional system and their evolution with migratory movements. Regardless, occurrences have made it non-optimal to recover first-hand information and to explore this pathway. Instead, whilst keeping the same geographical delimitation, hopes have been driven towards disclosing the intricacies and the re-shaping of this migratory subsystem.

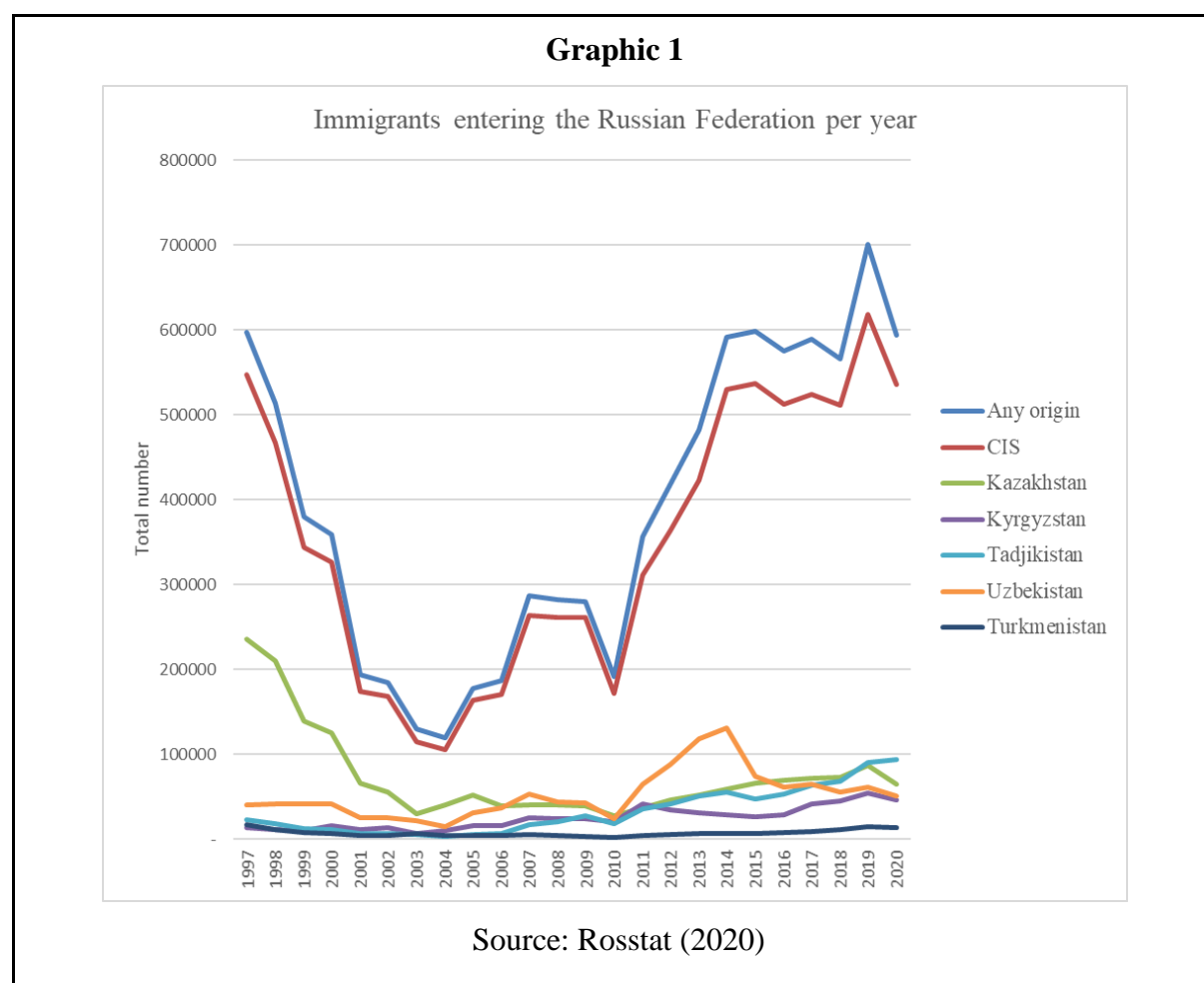
The reason for the present work's geographical delimitation, which will be further explained hereunder, is justified by the singularities that this migratory subsystem presents. Soviet metropolis' historical ties towards former Soviet republics generate enough momentum to attract most migrants coming from these countries. Russian society is usually seen by people from Central Asia, the Caucasus, and the former Soviet bloc as a desirable hosting community, with the promise of improved life prospects. As Khashimov et al. (2020) put it, "familiarity with the Russian language and culture, stemming from a shared Soviet past, geographic proximity, and Russia's acute need of labor migrants continues to pull Central Asia within Moscow's orbit".

Regardless, contemporary social, economic, and political events might induce the questioning of the previous statement. This is where the efforts of the present work are focused. Additionally, several economic and political factors are to be taken into account in order to get a trustworthy view of the patterns prevalent in the post-Soviet migratory subsystem.

The migrant's profile is also a matter to be contemplated. Are these mass movements, regardless of the socioeconomic position the individual occupies in its society of origin, or is there a predominant social stratum with more tendency to migrate? Whilst this is not the research question addressed here, it is of interest to address such a matter to get an enhanced depiction of the regional dynamics.

The research question that the present work tries to respond to is 'what are the socioeconomic and geopolitical causes that explain the migratory dynamics in the region'. The structure chosen

to approach the matter will be 'hypothesis-antithesis-synthesis'. The hypothesis of departure will be the assumption that the main cause for migration in the subsystem is of the socioeconomic marginal situation of the countries of origin. The aforementioned statement will try to be refuted, in order to open a window of constructive criticism, through an exploration of the current role of the Russian Federation as a regional hegemon questioning whether it is being subject to erosion, and thus the traditional explanatory causes for migration not being valid anymore. The final goal of the work is to reach a synthesis that sits firmly on the research conducted from the theoretical mark and through the case study.



Namely, the countries of major interest are Tajikistan, Kyrgyzstan, and Uzbekistan, as they are respectively the most remittance dependent countries in Central Asia. (Bahr 2022) According to World Bank data for 2020, remittances accounted for 26.68% of the total GDP of Tajikistan in 2020, a similar 31.3% of the GDP in the case of the Kyrgyz Republic and an 11.64% of GDP in 2020 in Uzbekistan (World Bank 2020d, e, f), though it is relevant to understand that official figures might differ strongly from reality, as informal, seasonal and irregular migration practices are very much common in the region.

Theoretical mark

Dealing with migration, due to the intricacy of the matter, entails two things upon which many scholars would agree: the need for a multidisciplinary approach and the weak theoretical base upon which migration studies stand. (VandenBelt 2021) Owing to the desiderata of the present case, and adopting the paradigmatic views of International Relations¹, transnationalism announces itself as a fruitful pathway. Initially coined during the Cold War, the stream describes the way relations between different states permeate into a wider level than the solely diplomatic links between state actors and/or their representatives, as contemplated by traditional IR theories, but from private companies, to individuals, passing through NGOs and the rest of socioeconomic performers. Taking into account the relatively recent unchaining of freedoms for non-state actors since the fall of the Soviet Union, this spatial framework seems as an interesting case to explore, due to the relative ‘purity’ of the actors and structures. As put by Luong (2002: 3-4) —a scholar specialized in Central Asia— when addressing institutional change, the exceptional conditions present in the transition from the Soviet era set the perfect natural conditions to constitute a real-life case study.

Post-constructivism and his sitting on a middle-ground between traditional and critical streams might also prove useful. Emerged as a middle-ground theory, partly as a contestation to social constructivism, partly to traditional material-based approaches, post-constructivism defends that it would make no sense to look solely at human views and practices (as social constructivism does) when analyzing the process of building of reality, as a wide range of elements aside from them have to be considered, e.g. material factors, drawings or calculations, (Knol 2011: 5) though it is obvious the sending and receiving regions in a migration system are tied together, primarily, by a series of linkages (historical, cultural, colonial and technological).

As discussed by VandenBelt (2021) in an attempt to reinforce theoretical background on the topic, to get a trustworthy idea of the bigger picture, migration networks, seen as another such set of linkages between the two core regions with a number of nuances to be considered, need to be incorporated as a variable themselves, being a shaping force as they are. This is an

¹ From now on referred to as ‘IR’.

important theoretical innovation to be taken into consideration hereafter, as it helps to solidify the often-muddy grounds where migration studies are based.

Furthermore, a critical approach must be taken when approaching the matter. Russia's hegemonic role regarding Central Asia is an uncontested historical fact. Regardless, the way in which Russia still interacts with countries from the region is to be revisited. Around a decade ago the Russian Federation started to adopt policies to curb migration, something that might seem irrational since the country has been experiencing a demographic crisis closely related to a health one since the 1990s. (Eberstadt 2010)

As a late statement to be done before proceeding to the body of the work, the aim hereunder is to explore not only formal power relations in the region, but also through the bigger picture obtained by observing informal interactions between migrants and present structures and distinct actors, both through demographics and through the macro study of sociological, economic, and political indicators.

Causes for regional migration

The Central Asian Republics (CARs) did not exist as a nation —as understood in the Westphalian sense— until their delimitation as Soviet Socialist Republics in the 1920s. (Isaacs 2015) Soviet statehood adopted the role of top-to-bottom ‘nation-makers’ whilst committing to ethnic particularism, growingly appealing to the pivotal identity of the *Sovetskii narod*: Zinoviev’s Homo Sovieticus (1986).

Historically, inter-republic migration in the USSR can be divided in two periods. From the beginning of the 1950s to the mid-70s, Russia presented a negative net migration accounting for a total increase of 2.7 million people, an event driven by an internal migratory policy focused on resettlement to sparsely populated regions for the exploitation of natural resources (northern and far-eastern Russia and Kazakhstan), post-war reconstruction (Ukraine and Belarus), the development of fallow land (the Baltic republics and Kazakhstan) and to build newly industrialized economies (Central Asia). Contrarily, a positive net migration was registered from 1975, increasing by 2.5 million the population of Russia by the collapse of the USSR (UN 2019), with flows initially directed to remote, resource-rich areas aided by the offer

of state benefits and later reallocated to the development of oil and gas fields in West Siberia and mineral resources elsewhere in eastern Russia. (Chudinovskikh 2017)

In the immediate post-Soviet period, with the release of ethnic conflict contained, accommodated, and 'defeated' until then by the set of strategies implemented by the USSR, state transitional processes became common in the region. (Rico 2015) According to the theory of political transitions, post-Soviet communist states transitions tend to be of a quadruple nature (Kuzio 2001), i.e., comprising political, economic, state-building and nation-building shifts. Furthermore, it is important to consider that in these countries structural transformation is not only linear, but that it can also present regime cycles, with consequent stages of democracy, autocracy, and revolution. (Hale 2005) All of the former help set a fertile breeding ground for fluxes of people to occur.

Contemporarily, regional freedom of mobility is one of the main causes for migration in terms of ease of access to the Russian Federation, as even though temporary, serves as a first contact with the receiving society for potential migrants. In this regard, the Eurasian Economic Union is an outstanding structure and actor founded in 2014, encouraging freedom of mobility of products and services and providing for common policies in the macroeconomic sphere and all its component fields. (Hauslohner 2014) Linked to this, post-Soviet states sit in an advantaged position in the visa policy of the Russian Federation, with CIS members having visa-free access, in some cases unlimitedly, whilst in most up to 90 days. For the rest of the world, in turn, the nationals of a handful of countries do as well enjoy the same privilege. In detriment of these anomalies susceptible to be studied, the focus here must be put on the Eurasian space.

When it comes to immigration figures, almost the totality of immigrants in the last two decades are original from state members of the Commonwealth of Independent States or CIS (Rosstat 2021) Breaking the immigrants' origin into a more detailed level, Central Asian states stand out as an important hub of origin for migrants.

Economically, Central Asian countries present a feeble primary income balance, compensated by a high dependence on remittance flows. To illustrate living standards and the income available to the people of the different countries for their expenditures it might be appropriate to look at indicators such as GNDI², especially when it comes to less-developed countries, as besides primary (or factor) income, it incorporates secondary income (unilateral transfers)

² Gross National Disposable Income = Gross National Income (GNI) + Net Secondary Income (NSI)

flows —most importantly in these economies, precisely, remittance flows— (Capelli 2013). Nevertheless, this thread will be abandoned here and left to the reader's interest, as using simpler, more general and widespread indicators will widen the possibilities for the research.

The lowest GDP per capita for the most recent year with available data, 2020, is presented by Tajikistan (US\$859), closely followed by the Kyrgyz Republic (\$1,173) and Uzbekistan (\$1,750), an order that has maintained over the last 20 years. (World Bank, 2020a) Next up there is Turkmenistan (\$7,612), governed by Serdar Berdimuhamedov in a form of (post-) Soviet stationary *sultanistic* neopatrimonialism applying tight control over its wider domestic umbrella. Its relative economic strength comes from the rents generated by the abundant natural resources of gas and oil deposits offered by its neighboring Caspian Sea. Next up we find Kazakhstan (9,122\$). As will be displayed later, the most developed in terms of Human Development Index —something that by itself explains its lower number of emigrants—, with the Russian Federation topping the classification (\$10,126).

Kyrgyzstan and Uzbekistan sit thus at a comparatively similar socioeconomic position. Along with Kazakhstan, which sits in a better economic position, they are the three countries that have managed to experience a non-violent transformation from Soviet Communism. These transitions led to different outcomes in each country anyway, (Luong 2002) even though it is to say that despite further or shorter comparative renewal, all the former USSR republics are still a form or another of neopatrimonialism. When it comes to the main common cause for migration from the region, endemic poverty must be highlighted, though when adopting an *ad hoc* perspective it can be seen that despite in the cases of Kyrgyzstan and Uzbekistan the aforementioned feature is explained exclusively by their belated transition into the capitalist world, in Tajikistan the civil war, ethnonational clashes and Rahmon's eternal presidency can be pointed at as to understand why this republic presents the most disadvantaged position in terms of GDP per capita. Kazakhstan, in turn, stands out from the other Central Asian states for its relative development advantage, with a GDP per capita sitting far nearer to the Russian Federation than to any other neighboring country. (World Bank 2020a)

Having overviewed the profile of the countries of the region, it is important to understand the bigger macroeconomic picture. Central Asia's economic evolution experienced the first contraction in a quarter century in 2020 due to the COVID-19 pandemic, the main forces being (1) the closing of borders and limitation of mobility, (2) the weakening of regional and global

demand and consequent reduction of exports and (3) to the fall on remittances (Burunciuc 2020).

The erosion of Russian Federation as a regional metropolis

Contemporary events might put the former outstanding role of Russia into a compromise. Leaving aside the main macro indicators and picking instead others that have been pointing in another direction is a must to put in perspective the re-evaluation of previous acknowledgments.

Anthropological-aimed factors should be included in the examination to get a proper understanding of the dynamics. The Human Development Index (HDI, UNDP 2020) for 2019 shows Kazakhstan presenting the highest cypher (0.825), closely followed by the Russian Federation (0.824). At a certain distance, we find Uzbekistan (0.720), the Kyrgyz Republic (0.697) and Tajikistan (0.668), respectively the antepenultimate, penultimate and the last in terms of wealth.

Stability is another factor to be considered in this regard. Based on information provided by the Fragile States Index (2021), overall trends from 2006 to 2021 show a general improving trend tending to a rapprochement between the cyphers presented by Central Asian states and Russia, apart from Kazakhstan, that sits at a distantly privileged position in the improvement spectrum. According to the Political Stability Index³ (The Global Economy, 2020), in 2020 the Russian Federation had the worst index (-0.73), followed by Tajikistan (-0.52), Uzbekistan (-0.44), the Kyrgyz Republic (-0.43), Turkmenistan (-0.29) and Kazakhstan (-0.26). Unemployment rates in Russia and Central Asia, in turn, have been pairing up in recent years, (World Bank, 2021) and are no longer to be regarded as a cause for migration, but rather as the resulting product.

Despite the focus on the work being on the factors given in the countries of origin that first impulse migratory movements, it would be improper to leave unseen the reception and degree of acceptance the migrants will find in the welcoming country, as this will have a direct impact on figures and migration net balances. Amid economic, demographic, cultural, historical,

³ Ranging from -2.5 (weak) to +2.5 (strong).

infrastructural, and geographical factors, the phenomenon is to be studied by how migrants from a certain collective are perceived in and by the receiving society.

Unrest in the form of negative feelings, xenophobia and discrimination towards the newcomers posit a negative counterpart to be considered, especially considering that we are currently witnessing, as legal scholar Dauvergne (2008: 2)⁴ put it, the ‘illegalization of migration’, a scenario where disproportionate exploitation and socio-political exclusion allots ‘illegalized migrants’ (Bauer 2013) the role of “modern proletarians” (Balibar 2000: 42). A survey from the Levada Center (2022) conducted December 16-22, 2021, among a representative sample of all Russian urban and rural residents, shows that 68% of respondents believe that the Russian government should limit the influx of migrant workers and that 57% of them uphold that the presence of migrants in their region is excessive, whilst, in partial contradiction, a 50% of Russians maintain that the work done by migrants is good for the country and society. The same survey tried to account for the social distance existing between the Russian population and a few other ethnic groups through the use of the Bogardus scale⁵, unveiling that the ethnic antipathy towards the peoples from Central Asia (Tajiks and Uzbeks) sits on 51%, ranking second only to be tied with Gypsies and surpassed by Africans, on a slightly higher 52%.

Negative feelings towards immigrants do not just sit there. They reflect attitudes, practices, and conditions of life in the Russian Federation. Many are the authors who have conducted studies and reported on the bad treat Central Asians are given, often going further than ethno-racial harassment, such as in—but not limited to—the case of Tajik seasonal migrant workers, who often operate irregularly, i.e. outside of the institutional protection, and thus are often subjects to infra-paid jobs with bad conditions, especially in urban areas. (Agadjanian 2017)

From the point of view of Tajikistan, Kyrgyzstan and Uzbekistan, Kazakhstan started to become an interesting destination for migrants, aside from its overall higher development, because of its proximity and visa-free policy with CIS countries. In terms of migration policy, the main watershed moments took place in 2006 and 2013, when Kazakhstan passed an amnesty law granting temporary legal status to migrants arrived before June of that year, while in 2013 a number of national laws on the recruitment of house workers were amended,

⁴ ‘Making People Illegal: What Globalization Means for Migration and Law’ (2008), Catherine Dauvergne digs into the relationship between illegal migration and globalization.

⁵ Through specific questions on co-existence with a 1.0-to-7.0 response range, where a higher cypher denotes a weaker affinity, the overall distance between two groups is expressed from 0 (inexistent social distance) to 100 (both groups sitting on the extremes of the spectrum).

permitting the legalization of a considerable share of formerly irregular migrants —and increasing the state budget thanks to the new taxpayers—. (Sadovskaya 2016) Kazakhstan's experience can be regarded by other host countries as of how to actively respond and accommodate many irregular migrants. In any case, national legislation for migration is negligible in the region and both countries of origin and of destination ought to take a step upfront and adopt a more normative role.

Russia's lack of a coherent immigration policy (WPR 2019) might be shifted by shadowing its southern neighboring country, with potential benefits in the form of externalities such as the call effect for new migrants, a possible option to the demographic crisis faced by the Eurasian giant, killing two birds with one stone. What is more, the right of immigration to Russia is not to be dismissed, since as Kawato articulates (2013), "it is one of the few means to keep its influence [Russia's] in the former Soviet republics".

Coetaneous with the writing of this piece and in defiance of the examination of Russia's regional role and her presumed enfeeblement, Ukraine's invasion is unchaining events in the former Soviet periphery that previously were unpredictable. A notorious number of Central Asian working migrants established in Russia have already been reported to have left the country. Thus, remittance flows from Russia are expected to shrink, not to say disrupted, due to sanctions and the exclusion of Russian payment systems from the SWIFT network. (Ratha 2022) The struggle will therefore be felt in Central Asia and the Caucasus through a steep fall in remittances and economic performance, (Lillis 2022) causing countries and people in the region to tremble once again with the externalities of being in Moscow's shadow.

Conclusions

Despite migration from Central Asia into the Russian Federation still being considerable, certain features must be pointed out. A look at recent indicators and happenings might lead to the conclusion that the old 'Rodina' is being eroded. Macro levels presented herein by the different countries, point to a rapprochement between certain Central Asian states and Russia, as so do other indicators pertinent to the research.

Anyway, it cannot be said for the Russian Federation not to be carrying the lead in the region. Indisputably, figures still project a mainly unilateral flow, from the peripheries to the center,

but changes can already be observed depending on the countries of origin. Tajikistan and Kyrgyzstan still suffer from endemic poverty, and thus their population is more prone to look for better life prospects in Russia, either a by migrating indefinitely or on a seasonal (and often irregular) basis. Uzbekistan's institutional and political immobility can be correlated with the high number of emigrants. Kazakhstan has been presenting better figures both economically and socio-politically, and thus can be seen that emigration rates for the country are comparatively lower.

In the cases of Tajikistan, Uzbekistan and Kyrgyzstan, the main factors behind the number of these countries' nationals migrating to the Russian Federation are the marginal situation to which the average man on the street find themselves due to the clientelist features of the neo-patrimonial elites and governments, from the highest to the local-traditional level of governance. As for the case of Kazakhstan, it proves that when sitting in close terms with the hegemon economically, but surpassing it in political accountability and social well-being, as well as in migration policy, immigration will start to go uphill. Despite this underlining, poverty in the region, in some cases an endemic feature, still obligates people from the less privileged social strata to look for alternatives.

Everything herein seen must be read and interpreted considering the Eurasian contextual standpoint developed and aimed at by the Russian Federation. (Hoffman n.d.) Relations within the region have been subject to recent shifts due to this and must be re-evaluated in this new framework before committing to any statement.

A final lecture must be drawn out from observing regional dynamics: the confirmation of Russo-centrism. As initially assumed, the endemic socioeconomic situation of marginality in the countries of origin continues to be the main explanatory cause for migration flows in the region. Central Asian republics are a direct product of the USSR legacy, and it must be acknowledged that they are the direct result of historical happenings shaping the world into the one we have inherited. It is obvious to say that if it were not for these occurrences nowadays, we would face a very much different geopolitical reality. But what we can retreat from this thread of thought is the hidden lecture that without the USSR and the Russian Federation, Central Asian republics more than any other nation-state from the core Second World, would not be anything.

In conclusion, the processes currently endured in the region must be seen as questioning pre-established ways to do and go. Russo-centrism is still a reality in the region and the events that

are to come soon will most probably not provoke a big change on this, but instead just a shift in the structure of the system and consequently on the way actors operate in it. As happened in the 1990s, when predictions of probability of a violent breakout in the then-recently established 'stan' republics were dismissed for not materializing, we will have to wait to see what direction happenings go eventually, leaving elucubrations aside. History has put Kyrgyzstan, Uzbekistan, and Tajikistan in a social, economic, and geopolitical position where, up to now, they cannot afford to act carelessly and costless, as neither do their nationals.

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