Migration Processes in Central Asia:
Main Directions and Key Issues of Regional System

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Abstract: Migration is an important phenomenon of the 21 century. The new migration trends appeared in the context of globalization and they cause various effects. Labor migration is one of the key trends dominated in all regions including Central Asia. Labor migration in Central Asia covers Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, Turkmenistan and Uzbekistan. At the same time it is really difficult to exclude Russia which is the main migration hub on the whole post-Soviet space. Discussions on the formation and functioning of the regional migration system touch the sending and receiving countries issues in Central Asia, which need joint efforts and regional approach. One of the central questions in the discussions is strong and remaining position of Russia as the main migration hub. However, last decade Kazakhstan is on the agenda as a new and perspective destination. Migrants' issues is still and weakest point. Despite the increasing scale and importance of the process for the region there are a number of issues which need new approaches and more effective cooperation.

Key words: Labour Migration · Migration Issues · Central Asia · Regional Cooperation

INTRODUCTION

The processes of globalization are accompanied by the rapid changes in global political and economic systems have contributed to a sharp intensification of international migration. Migration gained some new features during last two decades and represented by new trends like globalization of migration, acceleration of migration, differentiation of migration, feminization of migration, growing politicization of migration, proliferation of migration transition and increasing prevailing role of economic or labor migration [1]. It covers all regions and cause different but significant effects involving 3% of the world's population [2]. As one of the key global issue migration is important on the regional level but still it is in the domestic response.

Migration issues are also important in Central Asia in the context of regional development and integration of the region. Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, Turkmenistan and Uzbekistan, the countries that currently comprise 'Central Asia', emerged in the post-Soviet period. As such, they had no experience as neighboring states in the political sense as national units before they were included in the USSR [3]. Twenty years after Soviet rule did not build any effective regional institutions despite a number of common issues like water shortages, religious extremism, drug trafficking and migration, including legal and illegal aspects.

The five countries of the region have not made any significant progress in the migration arena, complicated by the fact that legislation generally develops very slowly and mostly within bigger Eurasian migration systems and with Russia taking a leading role. Underlying all these issues is the persistent challenge of data limitations that impacts migrations assessments and estimates. This may be one of the most important factors in both future analysis on the challenges and the bases for agreement in the region, moving forward.

The aim of the paper is to discuss the current issues of labor migration in Central Asia, including Russia from the positions of sending and receiving countries. It could help to shade a light on the key and controversial aspects of regional migration process, minimize negative effects and strengthen positive impacts. At the same time analyzing potential acting migration system could improve the integration component in the region.

Methodology: Migration issues are effectively analyzed by using "push-pull" models offered by Lee [4]. The models still dominate in migration studies both in

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theoretical and practical fields [5]. "Push-pull" models usually identify various economic, political, environmental and demographic factors which are assumed to push migrants out of places of origin and lure them into destination places. It makes convenient to explain migration processes in the Central Asian region.

Taking into account the multidimensional nature of migration phenomenon, in our point of view, the theories of international relations can explain the specific trends in Central Asian region. In this context, neo-liberalism seems the most acceptable theory. The main provisions ofneo-liberalismcan explainthe main difficultiesin the way ofsolving themigration problems in the region. According to the neo-liberal approach governments of sending and receiving states in Central Asia (CA) can effectively cooperate in the field and create mechanisms of sustainable management of the migration process.

Central Asian Migration System: Sending and Receiving Countries: 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. 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]. Other Central Asian experts [7] challenged this point by emphasizing Turkmenistan (which is very passive in the field) and Tajikistan (which migration is exclusively directed to Russia). It seems like both statements are true in certain extend and CA migration system could be analyzed as system included five CA countries and Russia. This approach will allow studying current migration issues in the region more holistically.

Receiving Countries in Central Asia and Key Issues: To understand the regional migration dynamics it is necessary to refer to the receiving countries' migration characteristics. The main destination countries are the Russian Federation and Kazakhstan. The UN estimates rank Russia as the first destination country in the region [8] and second in the world after the United States of America. Kazakhstan is the world's fifteenth largest recipient of labor migrants having become an important receiving country since 2004 [9]. As mentioned previously, the imbalance between supply and demand of labor and low living standards drive the population movements to Russia and Kazakhstan.

In 2004-2008, the height of the boom years, 800,000 Kyrgyz, 1.5 million Tajiks and 2.5 million Uzbeks left to work in Russia and Kazakhstan, in construction and retail, agriculture and housing services, usually in low paid work that local people had rejected [10]. In this context, it makes sense to consider migration processes within Central Asia and Russia as a system/unit of analysis. However, Turkmenistan is excluded in the paper as a really passive actor in the regional activity.

The main pull factors for migrants coming to Russia and Kazakhstan can be considered as the following: sustainable demand for workers, the demographic driven labor shortage, higher wages, the lack of a visa regime, lower transport costs and a common culture and language (especially with Kazakhstan). Common culture and language facilitate communication between local employers and labor migrants from Kyrgyzstan and Uzbekistan.

Kazakhstan has become a relatively new power player in this regional relationship. It has emerged as a major economic force in Central Asia largely on the strength of its significant oil and gas reserves. Improvement of the economic situation in Kazakhstan, a favorable investment climate and a national policy aimed at modernization and sustainable development have made the country very attractive to migrant workers from neighboring countries. The country has been forced to embrace the reality of large-scale labor migration, that receiving countries face an objective necessity to control the process. To achieve this goal Russia and Kazakhstan have toughened immigration and labor laws and increased administrative penalties for using illegal labor. However, these measures have had a limited effect. The huge scale of migration, especially given a climate of rampant corruption, makes it difficult to control.

For both Russia and Kazakhstan, as for other countries of destination, it is necessary to pursue a more balanced and comprehensive approach for the implementation of more effective immigration policies.

Experts suggest different approaches to the this issue but generally there is agreement around points like the need for adapting national law to align with international law in the migration field, to promote information support activities for labor migrants, to promote cooperation of local, regional and national official structures in the field of migration control and support, to pay more attention to the integration of migrants into the local communities (even seasonal workers) and to securing their rights [11].

More specifically, states should ratify the ILO Conventions relating to the protection of migrants' rights and implementation of migration. It will promote better and faster cooperation in national and international law harmonization.

Information support activities could take the form of promotion and organization of information centers for the dissemination of information on immigration and labor laws of the host country and the rights and freedoms of labor migrants. This would combat the information vacuum and gaps in the field. Non-governmental organizations and ethnic communities can also be heavily involved in this function. Information about the rules, regulations and procedures concerning the recruitment of foreign workers should be extended not only among the migrant workers, but also to potential employers.

Enhancing the interaction between employers, employment agencies and local authorities to ensure the priority of protecting local labor markets will be fruitful both for developing national migration control and support system in the receiving countries and for migrants. For Russia and Kazakhstan it is desirable to promote the employment of migrant workers, providing their legal protection and integration.

In addition, it would be useful to simplify the procedure for obtaining permission to hire foreign workers for employers while increasing responsibility for illegal hiring. Employers operate in an environment where illegal labor is not only free from bureaucratic procurement, but available at a substantially cheaper rate. This is obviously not a problem unique to this labor environment, but it makes it no less pernicious.

Finally, it is necessary to develop a system of accounting for workers, inclusive of social and psychological adaptation to the local community, in order to avoid negative consequences for both the host country and for the migrants. This is certainly not the sole burden of the receiving countries. It is a challenge most effectively addressed through coordinated action among sending and receiving countries.

Sending Countries Issues: There are several prominent shared push factors in Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan and Uzbekistan, including the lack of legal infrastructure supporting economic development and the weakness and infectiveness of political and social reforms. However, it is worth briefly examining the individual country profiles as there are salient differences.

Kyrgyzstan, with a population of 5.4 million people [12] has no large reserves of natural resources and its economy is still weak. Frequent revolutions (2005, 2010) further weakened the country and accelerated the migration process. According to various estimates there are nearly half a million people involved in labor migration in Kyrgyzstan and their remittances reach 14 - 16% of GDP. According to estimates of Kyrgyz economists, the number of migrants varies from 10 to 18% of the economically active population of the country and the money transfers made from 10 to 25% of GDP (200 - 500 million) [13]. Either projection paints a picture of an overly dependent economy lacking in domestic growth.

The main push factor for the labor force of the country, not surprisingly, is the deep poverty of the majority of the population. The main labor donors are the southern regions of Kyrgyzstan - Osh, Jalal-Abad and Batken. As in Tajikistan and Uzbekistan, the land-poor and overpopulated Ferghana Valley is the source of significant numbers of workers abroad.

Uzbekistan has different push factors than Kyrgyzstan but labor migration here is much more intense. Uzbekistan has very good economic potential and a population over 28 million [14]. Uzbekistan would benefit greatly from the development of a regional infrastructure and cooperation due to its central location. However, excessive political pressure and a closed regime seriously hamper its development. Labor migration from Uzbekistan, particularly, is opaque to analysis and there are no reliable expert estimates of the number of migrant workers and remittances.

The number of Uzbek labor migrants in Russia reached approximately one million in 2010 [15]. In addition to Russia, Uzbek migrants go to work to Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan. Kyrgyzstan mainly attracts labor from the border areas of Uzbekistan, which would seemingly constitute an easier geographic/cultural transition. The remittances coming to Uzbekistan, according to some estimates, reach at least 4% of the GDP of Uzbekistan. In absolute value, they are significantly higher than coming into the country through foreign direct investment (FDI) [13]. Uzbekistan has the unique national approach

to labor migration that it is 'personal choice'. In this convenient formulation, at least from the perspective of national actors, the burden is much less to systematically improve the domestic economy and other factors that impact the domestic labor climate. Uzbekistan is not transparent for International Organizations' reports and reviews. This explains the lack of information on migrants and remittances.

The situation in Tajikistan is quite different. It is transparent for international organizations and is actively trying to adapt migration policy in compliance with regional needs. Tajikistan is the poorest country in the region with over 7 million in population [16]. The total number of migrant workers from the country is about 1.3 million people. About 85% of them are sent to Russia. At least a quarter of Tajik workers are concentrated in Moscow. Including Tajik labor in Kazakhstan, Uzbekistan and Kyrgyzstan, projections for labor migration are as high as 1.5 million [10].

In some regions of Tajikistan, especially hard-hit by the civil war and total chaos of the 1990s, the pull to work abroad captures most able-bodied men. Thus, according to the World Bank, in 1996, 70% of the adult male population of the town of Kurgan-Tube and Garm worked in Russia and Iran [17]. According to the World Bank Tajikistan is one the most remittances dependent countries in Central Asia and Eastern Europe in 2009 [8].

Generally speaking, all three countries face significant challenges in the arena of transformation and development. In Tajikistan half of the active labor force is unemployed, while Kyrgyzstan suffers from massive rural unemployment. Before the crisis hit, up to five million people from these countries left home for Russia and Kazakhstan to take on poorly paid and unskilled jobs which are largely rejected by local people (International Crisis Group, 2010). Thus, the situation shows that for the countries of origin labor migration is a very important part of their policy and development. Very strong push factors forcing migrants to be active actors of labor migration in the region. However, thus process is not painless and sending countries face a number of challenges. These challenges cover several aspects: regulation of large-scale seasonal labor migration, developing legislation in the field of emigration and protection of migrants' rights in the host countries and promoting better conditions for them. One more big issue is a re-integration or adaptation of migrant workers

into the home/sending society after returning from abroad. These issues cannot be effectively addressed unilaterally.

Legislation in the field of migration is developing much slower than the migration situation itself and has not been very responsive to emergent challenges. The current formulation for most countries simply reflects migration orientation. For example, the sending countries - Tajikistan and Kyrgyzstan as export-oriented labor forces, have articles on the protection of migrants in the host countries. In Uzbekistan the process has been a bit more deliberate and effective. However, all of the sending countries of the region suffer from incomplete and often contradictory legislation. Intra-country legislation differences will be increasingly difficult to reconcile if the situation persists. Uzbekistan hasn't adapted UN and ILO Conventions on migrants' rights, for example. Supportive and framing legislation remains a crucial area for improvement across the region.

One critical arena, in which legislation could be very beneficial, is in guaranteeing better condition for migrant workers. Creation and development of the infrastructure for migrant workers in receiving countries, in particular to facilitate the procedure of emigration and employment promotion would be beneficial for all parties, ultimately.

Other reforms could include the creation of a current vacancies database in the receiving countries and responsive centers for training and retraining of migrants to meet these needs. Core training could also include Russian language training, which is the language of international communication in the Central Asia, but lost its former importance in the some of the former states (Tajikistan and Uzbekistan). Development of cooperation within sending countries and on the regional level with the receiving countries could be a valuable point of insertion for the work of NGOs. The development of effective cooperation between all participants of the migration process could be particularly effective at addressing the problem of reintegration of migrants into local communities.

Key factors leading to labor migration in the region are population surplus related to opportunities, especially in rural areas and the search for jobs and economic opportunity. Unemployment and poverty are considered factors that forced them to labor migration. Challenges faced by sending countries are complex and should be responded by the active position of governments which do not really concerned by labor migrants' issues.

CONCLUSION

Labor migration in Central Asia is an important phenomenon which has been increasing over the last ten 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. Only the joint efforts of governments, effective regional institutions, NGO's and experts can solve this problem.

Recommendations: Taking into account the fact, that Russia is an indispensable actor in the region, due its geopolitical, political and economic potential it is therefore necessary to intensify cooperation both between CA countries and between Russia and the CA on the main issues in this field, as it is truly one of the defining phenomena of this region.

Kazakhstan has real potential to be a strong migration hub and promote regional cooperation in migration field. Kazakhstan's efforts would be further supported by its economic stability, dynamic development and its role as a source of investment. However the lack of institution effectiveness in Central Asia and intra-regional cooperation, political elite's weakness, corruption in the field and common vision of migration as a domestic issue slow down the process.

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