Research Reports

Narratives of Migration and Kazakh Identity

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Following the downturn of the "transitional" economy in Kazakhstan, hundreds of thousands of Kazakh villagers left their homes for urban areas. In my research, I examined the notions of identity, ancestry, and the nation that emerged in the narratives of recent rural to urban migrants in Almaty. Special attention was paid to how their experiences of displacement and adjustment to their new environment have been systematically misconstrued in urban mass media and social analysis in a fashion that resonates with the colonial rhetoric of the Soviet regime.

For this study, I conducted twelve months of fieldwork in 1999 (January-December), followed by return trips in 2000, 2001, and 2002. My interviews with Kazakh men and women who arrived in Almaty after the demise of the Soviet Union in 1991 formed my main method for collecting data. I purposefully sought to include in my sample migrants from different regions of Kazakhstan. I wanted to find out how regional and ancestral attachments play out in the context of urban migration to Almaty and whether patterns of migration and adaptation in urban environments resonated with national discourses. To incorporate voices from different locales, I made side trips to Astana, as well as Atïrau and Shïmkent, and visited two villages in Almaty and Zhambïl Provinces. Finally, through personal communication and analysis of Kazakh- and Russian-language media and scholarly literature, I collected opinions among second generation and old-time Kazakh urban residents, which allowed me to incorporate their perspectives concerning rural-to-urban migration in my research.

By focusing on my informants' migration to the city, I was particularly interested in learning their family situations (past and present), their decision-making concerning their arrival to the city and subsequent arrangements, their strategies for finding housing and jobs in Almaty, as well as their social relations in the city and across the urban/rural divide. In addition to oral narratives that I collected by means of unstructured and semi-structured interviews, I carried out a cognitive network analysis.

This network analysis helped me to reconstruct (at least partially) 28 migrants' communities in the city built around my informants' family members, kinspeople, and fellow villagers who were also co-habitants, neighbors, and/or co-workers. The migrant community may also include other individuals with whom former villagers have spontaneously reconnected in the city, as well as those whom they have recently met and to whom they are related occupationally, residentially, and/or by virtue of shared aspirations and interests. Through reestablished connections and new acquaintances recent arrivals get access to other migrant communities. These operate in the city and across the rural/urban divide; they are not isolated networks but form extended chains of contacts that help to address migrants' needs for services and comfort. These communities and their social connections formed a migrant "frontier zone" that emerged in Almaty after 1991.

Subsequently, I used a narrative method as a strategy of analysis, so that my discussion was organized around case studies formed on the basis of my informants' testimonies. This method was an effective way to foreground migrants' voices, which need to be heard and integrated into social and cultural analyses on post-Soviet Kazakhstan.

By focusing on recent urban migrants' own understanding of their social world and locating their narratives within a broader urban context, I argue that Kazakh identity, generally understood to be based on the idea of common descent, has been continuously reevaluated under the stress of the post-socialist transitional period. What seems to be

an outcome of this reevaluation is the formation within the nation of particular spaces "in-between," where the ethnic name is consistently "hyphenated," such as "being Kazakh and being rural" as opposed to "being Kazakh and being urban." Based on two distinct sets of motives, predicates, and expectations (both originating in the ambivalence of the transitional position of their bearers in the nationalizing society and the globalizing world), these two perspectives, urban and rural, shape two sets of subjectivities caught in enduring opposition, building grounds for new forms of collective identities. As part of this argument, I trace how the rhetorical image of recent urban migrants' "otherness" — they are described in urban discourses as confused and resentful inhabitants of urban slums, who find it easy to engage in excessive alcohol and drug abuse, violence, and crime — enters the practical domain of social relationships in the city.

The claims of rural/urban identity manifest unequal power relations within the nation, echoing developmental discrepancies between the city and the village during socialism and thereafter. My argument here is that the legacy of this inequality allows the urban populace to exercise power over former villagers' images of the rural/urban difference, which they communicate to the larger world. By systematically misconstruing their experiences of displacement and adjustment to their new environment, these images depict former villagers as an obstacle in the society's transition from the Soviet state to a more advanced collective state of being. The fashion in which these images are structured resonates with the colonial rhetoric of the Soviet regime, defining Kazakh society as archaic, inferior, and, therefore, incapable of modern nationhood and self-governance. I demonstrate this contention with a reference to the work of several Kazakh social scientists who ascribe to migrants a sociocentric ("clan") orientation, which, they claim, has its origins in the outdated "tribal" ideology of the Kazakh nomadic past and still characterizes the social environment of the Kazakh countryside.

By juxtaposing migrants' personal testimonies with urban discourses that reflect more privileged standpoints, I have been able to undertake a more nuanced analysis of Kazakh culture, identity, and society in the post-socialist urban milieu, which I have located within broader historical and theoretical contexts. Ultimately, attention to local meanings and engagements has made clear the flaws of existing analytical frameworks.

First, attention to local meanings highlights Kazakhs' agency — something that is downplayed in usual approaches. Much Western literature argues that Soviet authorities had defined the republics' political borders as well as Kazakh ethnic boundaries on the basis of their own considerations and to the best of their knowledge; in this view, the Soviet state was exclusively responsible for the ethnic/national imagination developed among the Kazakhs later in the century. This framework, figuring Kazakh ethnic identity as merely imposed on the society by the Soviet regime, appears to be too simplistic.[1] It downplays the role of local efforts to define Kazakh ethnic identity within the realities of a Kazakh cultural repertoire, especially genealogy and the idea of common origins both stemming from the *shezhire*, historical narratives articulating ancestral ties. And as a result, it fails to make sense of postsocialist ambiguity and contestation within Kazakh society.

Second, attention to local meanings problematizes simplistic primordialist views on identity. A second influential framework, which was also picked up by Kazakh scholars in socialism's aftermath, produced narratives that, using Chatterjee's phrase, "continue to run along channels excavated by colonial discourse" (Chatterjee 1993: 224). Here, Kazakh identity was understood through the prism of social divisions into tribes and clans transplanted fairly unchanged from the past into the present-day culture and social reality, fueling and being fueled by underdevelopment, especially in rural areas. The problem with this approach is that, by following the lines of functional analysis, it fails to recognize that the shezhire may only seem to represent some sort of "a long established pattern of values," which in turn "implies a rigid mental outlook or rigid social institutions," as Mary Douglas (1969: 4-5) insisted in her critique of a materialist treatment of religion. We cannot simply assume that social/ethnic processes in Kazakh society form a practical image of the ordering principles suggested in the shezhire. In the context of post-socialist rural to urban migration, invocations of the shezhire convey migrants' experiences of migration, distance, belonging, shaping their sense of self, negotiation of family relations, and how they construe their ethnic universe. In this sense, the assumption of Kazakh *roots* deriving from the shezhire is a narrative

[1] For an in-depth discussion of this issue see Esenova (2002).

reconstruction of their *routes* in time and space that helps them to make sense of their experiences and links them to larger collectivities from family to the nation.

References

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Uzbek Communities in the Kyrgyz Republic and Their Relationship to Uzbekistan

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Identity politics has gained new salience in the aftermath of the Soviet collapse. The newly established polities, in most cases achieving unexpected independence, had to replace Soviet identity with alternative constructs. The fragmentation of the former Soviet space has often left ethnic groups scattered across the newly established borders, and the accommodation of cultural and political allegiances in multiethnic countries has become a central challenge to state- and nation-building in the Central Eurasian region.

In my doctoral research I explain the process of ethno-political mobilization among Uzbeks living outside the Republic of Uzbekistan. Particular focus is on mobilization strategies, modes of action, and relations between Uzbeks and Uzbek organizations on the one side, and state and supra-state actors on the other. I decided to focus on "Uzbeks abroad" for two reasons. First, the way an ethnic minority relates to the state of residence and country where the majority of co-ethnics are concentrated (kin country) carries high salience for state and nation building processes. Minority groups may pursue different strategies vis-à-vis the state of residence, ranging from "loyalty" to "exit" and "voice," to use the typology conceptualized by Albert O. Hirschman (1970). The behavior of minority groups tends to be influenced by the approach (inclusive or exclusive) adopted by the institutions of the state where they live. This is a dynamic and multidirectional relationship rather than a unidirectional one. In fact, group strategies and behavior influence state policies and possibly modify the way the state frames its relations with the group. In the case of stranded minorities, an equally important relation is that between the minority group and the kin country. Minorities can construct their identity as members of a diaspora[1] emphasizing their links with cross-border communities, or they can adopt different strategies privileging integration with the state of residence. Alternatively, the kin country can also adopt an active diaspora policy or decide to ignore co-ethnics altogether.[2] In sum, understanding how this set of relations develops can shed light on the strategies of mobilization adopted by the group (organizations), the rationale behind them, and their impact on state- and nation-building.

The second reason for my focus on Uzbeks outside of Uzbekistan is that the issue of cross-border minorities, especially the so-called Russian diaspora, has caught increasing scholarly attention over the past decade (Kolstø 2001, Laitin 1998, Melvin 1995, Zevelev 2001), but the dynamics of identity formation among cross-border Uzbeks in post-Soviet Central Asia have rarely been the object of research (Liu 2002, Megoran 2002). Field reports and studies on Uzbekistan's path to independence

[1] I adopt a broad understanding of the term "diaspora." Here it is seen as a "trans-border ethnic community" (King and Melvin 1998: 8) created "not by people crossing borders, but by the moving of borders across settlements" (Kolstø 1999: 610).

[2] For reasons of brevity I reduce the possible strategies to a binary opposition. Obviously, the reality is different and strategies are more complex.