Research Reports

Selected Papers from the 2004 CESS Conference

Editors' Note: With this issue, we introduce a new feature of the Research Reports section: papers presented at the annual conference of CESS. These papers were solicited by CESR editors based on recommendations by panel discussants. The selected conference papers do not replace CESR's traditional Reports on Research Findings and Conditions (see pp. 35-47), which we still highly encourage you to submit.

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This study examines irregular labor migration from Central Asia to the United States. The focus of this research is on unskilled labor migrants who are either smuggled into the US or work illegally, having arrived on tourist or other types of visas. The study's purposes are to investigate the factors contributing to the decision of growing numbers of temporary labor migrants from Central Asia to migrate and to propose a comprehensive theoretical model explaining post-Soviet unskilled labor migration. This objective can only be achieved after completing field research and obtaining first-hand empirical data via in-depth interviews with labor migrants. In this report I present preliminary findings from the descriptive part of my study, which examines how irregular labor migrants from Central Asia obtain US visas, how they find employment in the US, who facilitates the process, and what their experiences are.

There is a vast body of literature on international migration, especially on migration to the United States. Labor migration from the former Soviet republics has rarely been studied. Existing literature focuses exclusively on permanent immigration of former Soviet citizens of Jewish origin to the United States, Canada, Germany, and Israel (Lewin-Epstein et al. 2003, Aroian et al. 2003, Weinberg 2001, Hasson 1996), as well as on repatriation of ex-Soviet citizens of German ancestry to Germany (Munz and Ohliger 2003, Dennis and Kolinsky 2004, Rotte 2000, Hofmann 1994, Steinbach 2001). I address this research gap by studying illegal migration from Central Asia to the New York metropolitan area.

This research forms the basis of dissertation research that I will conduct in the New York metropolitan area in the fall of 2005. Information presented in this report is based on available literature, a review of press articles and interviews with a few labor migrants, as well as diplomats and consular officers who worked in Central Asia.

After the collapse of the Soviet Union and the consequent elimination of the state regulation of population movement, migration into, out of, and within Central Asia has become an acute and continuous process (Abazov 1999: 237). In addition to permanent external migration, people from Central Asia began to migrate to other countries for temporary labor, shuttle trade and other kinds of commercial migration. Russia is the most popular destination country for such labor migrants. The US is a highly desirable destination both for permanent immigrants and for temporary labor migrants. By most conservative estimates, over 1,000 Central Asians are working in the New York metropolitan area. Other destination cities in the US are usually large metropolitan areas such as Chicago, Los Angeles, Washington, and Seattle.

This study is guided by the theories of international migration that attempt to explain movements of people. Scholars of international migration agree that "there is no single, coherent theory of international migration, only a fragmented set of theories that have developed largely in isolation from one another..." (Massey et al. 1993: 432). I will assume a broader perspective by integrating several theories into a comprehensive

model that explains labor migration from the ex-Soviet republics of Central Asia.

The following theories are relevant in the context of labor migration from Central Asia. The *macro theory of neoclassical economics* is the oldest and best-known theory; it argues that international migration is caused by differences in the supply of and demand for labor in sending and receiving countries (Harris and Todaro 1970). The *micro theory of neoclassical economics* states that individuals are rational actors and decide to migrate after a cost-benefit analysis that projects a positive net return from migration (Todaro and Maruszko 1987). *New economics of migration* asserts that migration decisions are made by families or households and not by individual actors. Families, under this theory, attempt to maximize income and minimize risks resulting from market failures in unstable economies to improve their income relative to the rest of the community (Stark 1991). Moreover, this theory expects that migrants move to generate capital for specific purchases, such as housing or land, or to establish small businesses, and not to earn higher net incomes (Massey and Espinosa 1997; Taylor et al. 1996). *Network theory* posits that migrant networks in origin and destination countries increase the likelihood of international migration because they facilitate the integration of migrants in the labor market of the destination country, lower the costs and risks of migration and provide a support network for newly arrived migrants.

As economies in Central Asian countries deteriorate and unemployment rates soar, more and more individuals choose to migrate abroad for work. According to a poll conducted by Uzbek researchers L. Maksakova and V. Chupik (BBC 2003), among migrants leaving Uzbekistan 70 percent were migrating to support their families. Another ten percent were leaving specifically to earn money to make major purchases, such as apartments, houses and cars; to set up their own businesses; or to pay for college education or medical treatment. These migrant objectives are also true for other Central Asian migrant-sending countries such as Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan. The macro theory of neoclassical economics would be applicable in the case of labor migration from Central Asia to the United States, as unemployment rates grow resulting in surplus of labor supply.

There does not seem to be a significant number of labor migrants from Kazakhstan and Turkmenistan. This is most likely due to the continuous economic development and oil boom in the former, and restrictions imposed by the Turkmen government on travel outside the country in the latter.

Migrants turn to migration to buy a house or apartment, to start a small business, support their immediate and extended families, pay for their own living expenses, finance their children's college education and/or to marry them off. Since weddings and related traditional ceremonies can be quite costly in Central Asia, it is not surprising that one of the parents or a groom would resort to migration as the only way to be able to pay for the wedding and/or dowry. Consistent with the micro theory of neoclassical economics, Central Asian migrants weigh the cost of migration against expected revenue and decide to migrate if they project a positive net return from migration.

Enormous wage differentials make migration to the United States, even if illegal and expensive, a very attractive option. A majority of the migrants use the services of so-called migration facilitators or human smugglers, who organize the migration process and coach them on answering questions during the US embassy visa interviews.

Migrants typically list on their visa application one of the following reasons for wanting to visit the United States: visiting friends or family who are legal residents in the US; business trip (businessmen and entrepreneurs); business trip as part of a government or NGO delegation; exchange trip sponsored by religious groups that have a presence in Central Asia; participation in a professional conference held in the United States; enrollment in a language class or in a university or other academic institution; visiting graves of relatives; or participation in a folk festival, etc.

It is hard to estimate how many Central Asian labor migrants there are in the United States. The US Embassy in Uzbekistan estimates that one third of Uzbek citizens who receive tourist visas to the US do not return,[1] which suggests that they are likely to have entered the illegal labor market.

Migrants report having paid anywhere from $4,000 to $10,000 to migrant traffickers for their passage to the US. It is noteworthy that smuggling fees only increase, further enriching traffickers, as

[1] Interview with a former Consular Officer at the US Embassy in Uzbekistan, September 22, 2004.

the US government imposes tougher restrictions on travel to the United States, as was the case after 9/11. Most of the migrants do not have this amount up front and have to borrow the "passage fee" from friends and relatives or even loan sharks. Once employed in the United States, migrants typically pay off the debt within a year. Considering that sometimes both the nuclear and extended family pitch in to come up with the passage fee and then benefit from migrant remittances, new economics of migration theory might hold true for the case of Central Asian migrants. Further interviews would be required to test this theory.

When migrants arrive at their destination, they often contact other migrants for help in finding employment and accommodation. The role of migrant networks seems consistent with the network theory: migrant networks increase the likelihood of migration, because such networks make the integration of migrants in the US labor market easier.

There are also employment agencies that specialize in matching the migrants with potential employers, typically in the service industry. If the migrant is subsequently employed, the agency charges the migrant one or two weeks' wages for its services. Migrant workers also find jobs responding to advertisements in Russian-language community newspapers.

Migrants from Central Asia usually work in positions as domestic servants (women are hired as nannies, maids, caretakers of older people, etc.), sales personnel in shops, dishwashers, cooks or waiters in restaurants, chamber maids in hotels, or day laborers (e.g., one-day assignments in construction sites or to mow lawns). They are also employed in sweat shops and in the construction industry. Most migrants, especially those in domestic service, have to work 15-17 hours a day with one or two days off per month. Some employers allow migrants to take one day off each week. Typically the days off are unpaid, and migrants would have to find a place to spend the night. There is a whole network of informal "hotels" run by Russian-speaking immigrants, where a migrant can get a bed in a shared room for $10-$15 per night.[2] The newly arrived migrants would also live in a similar housing arrangement until they secure employment.

Female migrants in domestic service reported that their responsibilities included cleaning the house, cooking meals for the family, cleaning the dishes, taking care of the children, taking them to and from school, doing laundry and ironing, and other household chores. Sometimes such workers would have to take care of two households — the weekend and weekday homes of their employers.

Migrants reported earning between $1,000 and $2,000 per month. After paying their expenses, they usually send a portion or all of their earnings to their families back in Central Asia. Sometimes remittances from migrants abroad are the only means for their families to cover living expenses. Migrant remittances are also used to purchase property for migrants and/or their families, to finance their children's or other relatives' educations, to start a small business, to pay for weddings, etc. This trend seems to attest to the new economics of migration theory that asserts that migrants move to generate capital for specific purchases, such as housing or land, or for establishment of small businesses.

The economic impact of labor migration for sending countries is very significant. In Tajikistan alone, migrant remittances are estimated to be $200-230 million a year, representing a third of Tajikistan's GDP (Olimova and Bosc 2003: 94). In Kyrgyzstan, property prices have doubled in the last year. Real estate specialists attribute such a price hike to remittances, sent from migrants abroad, that are invested in property.[3]

Preliminary findings of the descriptive part of my research shed light on the main reasons for labor migration from Central Asia, how irregular migrants obtain US visas and find employment once in the US, who facilitates the process, and what their experiences are. The main phase of my research will consist of in-depth semi-structured interviews with migrants to examine all reasons for temporary labor migration out of Central Asia.

Labor migration has become a tool for adapting to the new economic and social challenges that resulted from the collapse of the Soviet Union. In transition countries of Central Asia, where economies are worsening and well paid jobs are scarce, labor migration helps to absorb and ease social discontent (Olimova and Bosc 2003: 8). In this sense, labor migration out of Central Asia

[2] Personal communication with a Kyrgyz labor migrant, September 19, 2003.

[3] Personal communication with three real estate agents in Bishkek, Kyrgyzstan, August 2004.

contributes to stability in the region. To some extent it makes up for failed government reforms and provides an alternative means for economic stability in migrant families.

The purpose of my research is to develop a comprehensive theoretical model explaining the growing phenomenon of irregular labor migration from Central Asia to the United States. While this task can only be completed after conducting in-depth interviews with a large sample of labor migrants, preliminary findings suggest that such a model would include assertions of the macro and micro theories of neoclassical economics, the new economics of migration theory, and the network theory of migration. If other factors explanatory of migration decisions will arise in the course of the field research, they will be incorporated into the final model.

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Missionary Encounters in Kyrgyzstan: Challenging the National Ideal

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> "Why do you pretend to be a Muslim?" asked a Soviet anti-religious lecturer, [...] a young member of the Kirghiz Komsomol. The answer was: "Because I am a Kirghiz." [Dialogue quoted in Lemercier-Quelquejay (1984: 22).]

This short dialogue between an anti-religious lecturer and a Komsomol member was used by Lemercier-Quelquejay to illustrate the tight connection between ethno-national and religious identities in Central Asia in the 1980s. Because of this tight connection, she continued, it was not uncommon that devoted Communists and atheists would also stress that they were Muslim (1984: 22). At the time, this observation was surprising because it contradicted received wisdom concerning the place of religion in an "atheist" society. Since then it has become clear that the ties between religious and ethnic identity were to a significant degree actually fostered by Soviet national and cultural politics. Though the Soviet regime delegitimized religion, it simultaneously encoded religious identities through its nationality policies. As many authors have argued, the creation of the Central Asian "nations" was facilitated and given legitimacy by the mobilization of local "Muslim" cultures (e.g., Shahrani 1984, Karpat 1993). Conversely, it may also be said that Islam continued to be an important frame of reference, precisely because of this pairing of religious and national cultures.

The relaxation of laws against religious expression in the late 1980s and the sudden independence of Kyrgyzstan led to a renewed interest in cultural and religious roots. It could have been expected that as a result connections between Kyrgyz and Muslim identity would intensify. Instead, the Muslim-Kyrgyz composite has become more vulnerable in the post-atheist era. In fact, the challenge posed by the anti-religious lecturer who asked "why do you *pretend* to be a Muslim?" has returned with renewed force. The new interrogators are no longer atheists (who have ceased to exist), but Christian and Muslim "believers." Both Islamic purists and Evangelical Christians speak of the Kyrgyz as "people who *call* themselves Muslim" but "in fact" are only superficially so. Moreover, both groups view the pairing of religious and ethnic identity as unfortunate, because in their view faith should transcend ethnic or national categories. This is where similarities between both groups end. Islamic purists interpret the identification of Islam with "traditional" Kyrgyz culture as a perversion of Islam. As a consequence, it is people's customs and practices that have to be changed so that people can become "true Muslims." Protestant Evangelical Christians, by contrast, challenge not culture but religion, claiming that Islam is not only wrong, but also distorts Kyrgyz culture. Instead, they propose a Christianity that they see as culturally consistent with Kyrgyz ways of life.

My research focused on Evangelical Christian challenges to the ethno-religious composite in Kyrgyzstan. The topic is particularly relevant because of the large influx of Evangelical missionaries to the country in recent years. According to official sources there are now about 1,000 missionaries active in Kyrgyzstan, 700 of whom are Protestant Christians (Mamaiusupov 2003: 305-6). This sudden and large influx needs to be seen in light of increasing Evangelical attention to Muslim and post-socialist countries since the early 1990s. As Kyrgyzstan meets both criteria, and is seen as one of the most liberal post-socialist Muslim countries, it has developed into a sort of missionary hotspot.