“Uzbeks tend to lead ‘sedentary’ lives, and they are quite attached to their environment and family. The fact that millions of Uzbek migrants of various types abandon this lifestyle in search of a better life indicates that there are significant challenges to the nation-building process as these migrants are leading to a loss of what could be considered the “fertile soil of national reproduction.” – Farkhod Tolipov considers the problem of possible developments in migration in Uzbekistan in this cabar.asia exclusive.

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A Multifaceted Problem

Among the so-called non-traditional challenges for the Central Asian states today, labor migration is possibly one of the most difficult and multifaceted challenges due to its intensity and implications. Migration obviously impacts areas such as social relations, identity formation, youth acculturation, economic well being, and even foreign policy and national security.

Mass migration directly or indirectly modifies the nation-building process through the aforementioned acculturation of migrants abroad and, to a certain extent, their alienation from the environment as well as the general social and civic life of their homeland. During their migration, they are to a degree denied their civil rights and responsibilities full and placed in new extreme social and moral living conditions. Survival and wages are the two main concerns of migrants in a host country. Being abroad for a significant period of time, these migrants deny themselves the so-called “fertile soil of national reproduction”, which recreates the nation and the people and supports them as an interconnected social and political organism.
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Nuances

Labor migration from Uzbekistan is truly massive in character. About 2 million Uzbek citizens are currently living and working in Russia. They are scattered throughout the territory of the Russian Federation, from Kaliningrad and Moscow to Vladivostok. What distinguishes Uzbek labor migrants?

First, they are energetic, strong people. Second, while they could engage in various forms of labor, they work better in the construction, food services, and transportation industries. Third, Uzbek migrants leave difficult conditions such as unemployment in their homeland in search of a livelihood abroad only to find themselves in even more severe conditions in a foreign country. Fourth, the majority of this workforce is earning money mainly to send around $500 a month to their families back home (collectively, according to experts, these remittances account for roughly 10% of annual GDP). Fifth, some migration trends are regulated and directed by the state while others are more chaotic in nature. The later is more characteristic of the flows to destinations such as Russia, Europe and the UAE among others, even though private firms have recently appeared which offer assistance in finding employment abroad and with making arrangements in the host countries. Sixth, migrants flow back and forth, i.e. they leave and then return to their own countries. For example, they arrive in Russia for a given period (season) and return to their homeland to recuperate. Seventh, migration levels are very high, especially among young people. This means that the process of migration has yet to stabilize, and this large wave of labor migration in turn reflects a high and sustained unemployment rate in Uzbekistan.

As was stated earlier, labor migrants are not only setting out for Russia, but are also going to more far-flung countries such as the USA, EU, Japan and Korea. Migrants also travel to neighboring Kazakhstan, where they also have more than a few opportunities to find well-paid work. This particular labor flow is quite large-scale.

Until recently (before the financial crisis) the Uzbek-Kazakh land border crossing, for example, was constantly crowded and chaotic due to the massive flow of migrants crossing the border. This tableau can be observed in the Tashkent International Airport at those dates and times when flights from Tashkent to various Russian cities as well as return flights from Russia to Tashkent are scheduled. The entire building becomes a large, disorderly, and loud bazaar. Additionally, migrants use Kazakhstani territory to transit onwards to destinations in Russia, because this is much cheaper than air travel. As we have seen, migrants are reasonably brave people that are able to shoulder these burdens in search of a better life.
Overall, this type of migration is a complex phenomenon. We can discern a few types of global migration to which Uzbekistan contributes: 1) labor, 2) permanent residence, 3) brain drain, 4) human trafficking, 5) refugees. If we can call the first two forms traditional, then recently the problem of brain drain has grown much more acute. This trend leads to a loss of qualified specialists particularly in government structures, science, education, and medicine among other areas. Observations have also shown an increase in the proportion of female migrants, which was earlier largely unknown in Uzbekistan. Statistically, Uzbekistan has negative net migration. The level of emigration is 5-6 times higher than the level of immigration. 90% of migrants flock to Russia. In the 1990s, ethnic Russians dominated migration to Russia. This was due to the fact that they began to feel rather uncomfortable in the newly independent states and did not see any prospects for living and working for their children. They even feared a rise in Uzbek nationalism. True, many of these fears did not come to pass. Moreover, there was also an observable wave of Russian migration from Russia to Uzbekistan.

Today, the majority of labor migrants are ethnic Uzbeks, though there are Russians, Tatars, Koreans and other nationalities among the migrants. Both legal and illegal relationships between employer and employee are obviously present in the migration process. Many young migrants even start new families in Russia (some already have a prior family in Uzbekistan) and receive Russian citizenship.

The Securitization of Migration

Why does labor migration present a problem for national security and social stability? There are several reasons that this problem requires consideration. The categories of citizens that become migrants do so due to unemployment and harsh social and living conditions. This means that they are socially vulnerable and dissatisfied, but their destinations, for a variety of reasons, are no more comfortable.

First, most of them arrive in Russia without the necessary level of Russian language ability. Second, they immediately face problems in the host country with bureaucracy, corruption, oppression, and blackmail at the hands of migration officials, as well as racketeering, affronts to their human dignity, and simple fears for their safety. Third, migrants during their time living and working in Russia (normally a few years) observe and ‘learn’ the characteristics of social and political life in their host country.

All of this together plants the seeds in the minds of migrants of a more liberal worldview, culture, and behavior as well as the simple expression of disapproval and protest. These tired and angry migrants return home with these gained experiences. They are still in need,
uncultured, and unemployed in their homeland, but with some new cultural deviations and possibly a new political awareness.

Meanwhile, Uzbeks in Russia often become the targets of Russian nationalists, which leads to various conflicts. There are more signs of a further deterioration of the situation due to the economic and financial crisis in Russia that is noticeably reflected in the earnings of migrants. There are reports that the recent western economic sanctions against Russia have begun to negatively impact migration levels and forecasts. **In general, it should be noted that Russia may attract labor migrants due only to the fact that it offers certain benefits, but it cannot be a better example for the migrants’ social, moral, and cultural relations.**

Meanwhile, according to some media reports and data, dangerous and unhealthy factors are entering the migration environment. It is known that a few hundred Uzbek labor migrants in Russia were recruited into terrorist groups and ended up in Afghanistan and the Middle East.

Potentially, a large number of unemployed people can be a socially volatile mass. A return of labor migrants to their homeland obviously would lead to an increase in the size of this population in the country. This factor could presumably be used as an instrument by some political forces in Russia to apply pressure on Uzbekistan, which maintains a relatively independent foreign policy and has rejected membership in the Eurasian Economic Union.

For example, a question has periodically arisen for over a year in Russian political circles regarding the introduction of a visa regime for Central Asian countries. Recently, after a series of disturbances involving migrants from Central Asia, Franz Klintsevich, a member of the Federation Council, once again spoke of the necessity to introduce a visa regime for the Central Asian states. He did “spare” Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan, who are members of the EAEU and Customs Union. It would therefore be possible for them to avoid a visa regime. In this way Franz Klintsevich decided to divide Central Asia into “friends” and “enemies” of Russia, meaning one group presents a threat to Russians while the other does not. This egregious statement as well as the **manipulation surrounding the issue of labor migration is nothing but a smokescreen for the geopolitical ambitions of Moscow.**

The speculation surrounding the notorious idea of introducing a visa regime for Central Asian countries has lasted for so long in Russian media and among politicians that one is almost driven to say it would be better if they would hurry up and institute it rather than play games of hide and seek.

**Scenarios**
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The following are possible geopolitical scenarios and outcomes in this area

The “Quid pro quo” Scenario

After the last visit of Putin to Tashkent and Karimov to Moscow, some believed that the two presidents discussed *inter alia* the problem of labor migration and came to an unspoken agreement on how to control this process in the interest of both states. This would have been the more rational approach to the problem at the moment, considering that, regardless of the negative nuances of migration, the labor of guest workers continues to provides significant benefits to their host country, otherwise there would be no demand for labor migrants.

However, this view contrasts sharply with the narrow nationalistic and myopically politicized view of the situation, such as the aforementioned example of speculation regarding the introduction of a visa regime between the Russian Federation and certain (!) Central Asian states. **It is thought that the Russian Federation’s migration policies also require revisions in certain areas. In particular, the various Russian language exams for migrants and other similar strongly discriminatory measures should be repealed.**

The “Sanctions Ricochet” Scenario

Western sanctions against Russia are already impacting the position of labor migrants in Russia and are pushing them to return home. A large-scale return of these migrants could, to a certain degree, aggravate the issue of unemployment in Uzbekistan and increase the social and psychological tension in the country.

Meanwhile, there is a growing trend in changing the vector of migration flows to other countries at the expense of the Russian Federation.

It is thought that these alternative labor migration flows will not exceed the Russian vector, even though there are obvious decreases in the wages of labor migrants. First, it is the more convenient niche and has been occupied and mastered by Uzbek labor migrants, many of whom do not need to adapt to new conditions (including learning the language). Second, even under the current conditions due to sanctions, the migrant wages are still of minimum benefit. Third, migrants in the Russian Federation expect the sanctions regime will end and better times will come.

The “Calm” Scenario
This scenario can be associated with the status quo. First of all, any truly serious challenge to the state’s stability and security can exist only when the agents of that threat are well organized and have clear goals aimed at starting a movement. However, as was stated earlier, labor migrants are more concerned with earnings and less prone to protest. They are traditionally conservative, even though they are acquiring a liberal charge in their host country. Nevertheless, a harsh authoritarian state that is ready to crush any protest serves as a deterrent for potential troublemakers. Next, it is unlikely that the Russian authorities would become openly hostile in its relations with Uzbekistan (with whom the Russian Federation has signed agreements on strategic partnership and allied relations) and abruptly decide to deport Uzbek labor migrants from the Russian Federation.

The “It’s Better At Home!” Scenario

The adage “there is no place like home” accurately reflects the spirit and philosophy of Uzbeks. As such, one may assume that a decrease in the unemployment rate in Uzbekistan would not only decrease the intensity of labor migration from Uzbekistan but would likely also lead to a return of Uzbek labor migrants to their homeland. The country truly has large labor reserves as well as massive economic potential for creating new jobs and employment opportunities. Favorable natural and climatic conditions, well-developed infrastructure, coupled with the growing (as of yet unsecured) foreign investor interest in Uzbekistan are the primary factors preventing labor migration abroad.

A Search for Solutions

Obviously, due to the complex, multi-layered nature of migration of any type this problem cannot be solved easily or quickly.

First, the most obvious answer is, of course, “employment opportunities”. Liberalization for small and medium enterprises is necessary to create new jobs and decrease the unemployment rate. It is worth noting that the economic system of Uzbekistan is characterized by rent seeking, which negatively impacts independent businesses and the market economy. Serious liberalization of small and medium enterprises is therefore a requirement of the times.

Second, tax, customs, and various other forms of incentives can be offered to firms, companies, centers and individuals that offer employment and create new jobs.

Third, civil society must be educated on things such as the “consumer basket” and “living wage”. It is also worth holding open public discussions on migration, because different
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forms of migration should be addressed differently.

Fourth, because migration is simultaneously a social, economic, cultural, psychological, political, security, and developmental problem, it must be approached systematically with the framework of a wide, deep program of economic reforms and democratization within the country.

Fifth, understanding that migrants, labor or otherwise, often do not migrate of their own volition but rather due to difficult living conditions and circumstances, I think that national leaders and public figures should directly address the migrants with offers of moral support and calls to work patiently abroad. This approach would show an understanding on the part of the state of the problems facing migrants and would be a good sign for all Uzbek labor migrants abroad.

Conclusion

In the end, any form of migration – labor, changing one’s permanent residence, brain drain, or human trafficking – uncovers serious social and economic problems plaguing the country. Uzbekks tend to lead ‘sedentary’ lives, and they are quite attached to their environment and family. The fact that millions of Uzbek migrants of various types abandon this lifestyle in search of a better life indicates that there are significant challenges to the nation-building process as these migrants are leading to a loss of what could be considered the “fertile soil of national reproduction.”

By all appearances, they also are alienated from the political and cultural life of their country. For example, they are either not that interested in the parliamentary or presidential elections or unable (due to obvious technical and organizational circumstances) to participate in elections while living in Russia. Therefore, it is true that there is no place like home!

In this way, migration in its various guises presents challenges to both national identity and national security. Here we have mainly been speaking of labor migration, as other forms of migration demand separate consideration due to their own individual nuances and driving forces. One thing that is clear is that we are witnessing a social phenomenon of unprecedented scale and drama that demands a systemic, strategic and normative approach of study to fully understand.

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