KAZAKHSTAN, THE NEW COUNTRY OF IMMIGRATION FOR CENTRAL ASIAN WORKERS
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Although Kazakhstan experienced significant net emigration throughout the 1990s, it has now become a republic of immigration in the space of a few years. Large numbers of migrants from the other Central Asian countries are drawn to Kazakhstan because it is easier to move there than to Russia; xenophobia is much less rife; and the rhythm of economic development makes it very attractive in salary terms. According to official estimates, about 500,000 migrants from other Central Asian Republics work in Kazakhstan. At the CIS summit in October 2007, the Kazakh government distinguished itself by moving to have adopted a resolution on a series of legally and socially protective measures for migrants.

BACKGROUND: More than half of Kazakhstan’s Central Asian migrants are comprised of Uzbeks, while around 200,000 are Kyrgyz and around 50,000 Tajiks. The majority of migrants are concentrated in four regions: Almaty, Astana, Atyrau and southern Kazakhstan. In the first two regions, migrants are chiefly employed in the construction industry, which is undergoing a real boom, while in Atyrau, several tens of thousands of workers (according to some sources, at least 30,000 Uzbeks) work in the oil industry. In southern Kazakhstan, predominantly Uzbek migrants are employed in the agricultural domain, especially in cotton fields. In Kazakhstan, a kilogram of cotton pays US$0.40 compared with only 0.05 in Uzbekistan. As for the Kyrgyz, a large number of them work on tobacco plantations.

The migrants are specialized in several different sectors: according to estimates, nearly a third work in the construction industry, another third in convenience services (the food service industry, small business, home repairs services), and the last third in agriculture. The highest salaries are in the construction sector (about US$200 per month), whereas those in agriculture are much lower (about US$80 per month). Although men constitute the overwhelming majority of migrants, there is an increasing number of women migrants: in 2002, women made up only 15 percent of Uzbek migrants to Kazakhstan, but by 2004 they made up nearly a quarter. Kazakhstan indeed lacks employees in sectors largely staffed by women, such as agriculture, the tertiary sector of the food service industry, and domestic services.

The Central Asian migrations to Kazakhstan can be divided into three categories: daily, temporary, and permanent. The first takes place notably in the border regions of southern Kazakhstan, where an increasing number of Uzbeks commute to work on the Kazakh side of the border during the day, and return home at evening. Regular border closures and administrative complications at customs thus trigger strong tensions among villagers who have become economically dependent on being able to
cross the border. The border post at Zhybek Zholy, for instance, is crossed by more than 4,000 Uzbek migrants each day. But for the majority of migrants, leaving for Kazakhstan is temporary. The length of stays thus vary largely depending on available opportunities: mostly they last between two and eight months, with construction works taking place in spring and summer, and work in the fields taking place in the fall. Many hope to return to their own countries after accumulating sufficient capital to construct a house or start up a small business. However, there are increasingly more migrants seemingly intent on staying on a permanent basis. As a matter of fact, between 1999 and 2004, more than 130,000 Uzbeks, drawn by higher living standards (an average Uzbek salary is around US$40 dollars, compared to $250 in Kazakhstan), moved to Kazakhstan permanently.

IMPLICATIONS: The Kazakh authorities are fully aware of the size of the migratory phenomenon and do not wish to resist it. On several occasions, the government has even stated that its citizens are not in competition for work with migrants because the latter fill a specific social niche, as they take the poor paying jobs refused by Kazakhstani citizens. The authorities nevertheless are seeking to reduce illegal immigration and to encourage legal migration, which is better controlled judiciary and socially. Accordingly, in 2006, the Minister of the Interior legalized 164,000 migrants from other CIS countries, despite having initially announced a figure of only 100,000. Out of this number, nearly 120,000 were from Uzbekistan, 23,000 from Kyrgyzstan, 10,000 from Russia and nearly 5,000 from Tajikistan. Astana’s open policy on migration has also led to the naturalization of many migrants: in 2005, more than 20,000 persons were granted Kazakhstani citizenship, three-quarters of whom were from Uzbekistan, 10 percent from Kyrgyzstan, and 5 percent from Tajikistan. The aim of this voluntarist policy is to counteract the country’s falling population and the resultant reduction in its labor force, and it is complemented by strategies inviting Kazakhs of the diaspora, especially from Mongolia, to “return”.

Although migratory relations between Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan are good, managing migratory flows between Kazakhstan and Uzbekistan has proved more difficult. Tashkent refuses to acknowledge the scale of the phenomenon. The Uzbek state has a monopoly on the legal dispatching of workers abroad, meaning each migrant is obliged to obtain official authorization from the Uzbek Agency of Work Migration. Since 2006-2007, the Uzbek government has also sought to hive off some of the financial flows of its “Gastarbeiter”. According to a government resolution “On registration of citizens seeking employment abroad”, Uzbek labor migrants have to come back to Uzbekistan, go through registration and pay customs dues before returning to work abroad. As a result, the majority of Uzbeks leave without legal permission and thereafter are unable to seek protection from their guardian state. This situation promotes human trafficking and the organization of mafia networks by recruiters who go from door to door asking for volunteers to work in Kazakhstan.

The working conditions of Central Asian migrants in Kazakhstan are still very poor. Legislation
dealing with immigration continues to be largely insufficient, failing to penalize abusive employers and to guarantee a minimum of social rights to migrants. The Kazakh police force does not seem in a hurry to denounce companies that employ migrants illegally. So, the very size of illegal migration tends to reinforce corruption in the police, the administration, and the customs services. A massive legalization is thus in the public interest, since it would enable these populations, services and money flows to become official, and therefore controllable.

CONCLUSIONS: Since Kazakhstan has a relatively low birth-rate compared with that of its Central Asian neighbors and was badly hit by the massive emigration of its Slavic population, its authorities have understood the necessity of an open migration policy. In fact, the country will be needing more than a million additional workers until 2015: migrants, then, are also contributing to Kazakhstan’s development and economic success. Moreover, since labor out-migration is postponing unemployment-fuelled social tension and socio-political instability in Kyrgyzstan and in Uzbekistan, Kazakhstan contributes to stability throughout Central Asia, taking on the role of the region’s economic leader.

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