

Migration Processes in Central Asia Through the Lens of Local and Foreign Researchers

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Abstract: This article is devoted to the historiography of migration processes in the countries of Central Asia. It also analyzes the causes and factors of migration in the Republics of Uzbekistan, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, and Turkmenistan based on the scientific research and theories proposed by local, Russian, and foreign scholars.

Keywords: Migration, Central Asia, emigration, Voluntary Return and Reintegration Program (VRRP), demography, labor migration, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Uzbekistan, Turkmenistan, Tajikistan.

Introduction: Migration processes play a significant role in the contemporary life of Central Asian countries. They directly or indirectly affect various spheres of public life in the republics. This influence can lead to both positive and negative consequences. Migration is one of the major phenomena of the 21st century. New migration trends have emerged under the conditions of globalization, producing various impacts. Labor migration is one of the prevailing trends across all regions, including Central Asia. Labor migration in Central Asia encompasses Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, Turkmenistan, and Uzbekistan. In general, research and analysis of migration processes in the 21st century, their historical development, and future implications have been and continue to be conducted in the region. For example, according to M.E. Leontyev, a researcher from Saratov State University, in his article "Immigration from Central Asian Countries: History and Modernity", migration exchange between Russia and Central Asian countries declined in the early years of independence. For instance, immigration from Uzbekistan to Russia decreased more than threefold from 150,000 people in 1994 to 48,000 in 2000. Simultaneously, the one-way migration flow that had emerged in the early 1990s became entrenched: in 2000, the reverse flow from Russia constituted only 12 percent of the direct flow into Russia, whereas in 1991 it accounted for one-third [13].

METHODS

In conducting this study, several academic methods were employed, including historical-comparative analysis, comparative approach, systematic analysis, and chronological consistency. The issue of migration processes in Central Asia has been studied by various scholars since the late 20th and early 21st centuries. These include Russian researchers such as G.Yu. Sitnyanskiy, V.I. Bushkov, V. Schensnovich, and Sergey Abashin; local researchers such as R.A. Ubaydullaeva, A.S. Soliev, Kamoluddin Abdullaev, R. Beybutova, and Z. Dadaboyeva; as well as foreign scholars like Giorgi Khishtovani. Their works and articles have focused on migration processes in the region. In local studies, migration is often presented based on state ideology, which creates challenges in presenting an unbiased view of the issue. In contrast, Russian and foreign researchers tend to study the issue in a more objective academic manner.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Valuable insights into the current state of migration history in the Central Asian countries can be found in the work by Russian researchers G. Yu Sitnyanskiy and V. I. Bushkov titled "Migrations of the Population in Central Asia: Past, Present, and Future" [11, p. 340]. This monograph examines migration processes occurring in Central Asia (Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Uzbekistan, Turkmenistan, and Tajikistan) and the

movement of the region's population beyond its borders. A historical overview of migration in the region is provided, with comparisons between “local” and “non-local” populations (particularly Russian-speaking groups). The authors analyze the current state of migration, including the legal status of migrants and their adaptation processes. The book is of interest to ethnologists, sociologists, historians, and a broader readership concerned with this topic. According to this monograph, from the late 1980s to 2002, nearly 4 million people in Central Asia and Kazakhstan became external migrants.

One of the well-argued analytical works on the contemporary ethno-political landscape and conditions of the Republic of Uzbekistan is the book “Uzbekistan: Ethno-political Panorama: Essays, Documents, Materials” by the ethnologist A. I. Gindzburg, a researcher at the Miklukho-Maklay Institute of Ethnology [7, p. 16].

The development of political regimes in Central Asian countries after independence is studied in the textbook “Central Asia at the Turn of the 20th–21st Centuries: Politics, Economy, Security”, authored by researchers of Ural State University—V. D. Kaminin, E. V. Lazareva, M. V. Lapenko, and A. V. Lyamzin [12, p. 175]. This publication examines the distinctive features of the sociocultural policies and economies of the Central Asian republics following the collapse of the USSR, as well as their security relations with Russia.

The migration situation in Uzbekistan, including its historical and developmental aspects, has also been addressed by Uzbek scholar Khafiza Mamadalieva in her article. The study outlines the specific characteristics of Uzbekistan's population reproduction regime and the new demographic trends that have emerged in recent years. The article highlights changes in the age and gender structure of the population that predefine the size of the labor force. Moreover, it explores how demographic factors shape many critical areas of the republic's socio-economic development and influence the formation of labor migration flows. According to the researcher, given Uzbekistan's current demographic situation, significant labor emigration to foreign countries, especially to Russia, can be expected shortly. Labor migration will continue to ensure relative stability in the labor market and generate cash remittances, thereby contributing to the improvement of living standards for the population of Uzbekistan [14].

In general, Uzbekistan has demonstrated relatively substantial engagement in the study of demographic processes. Within the historiography of Uzbek demography, these processes are regarded as social

phenomena in which the changing nature of population reproduction at the current stage of development is examined. Particular attention is paid to the role of state demographic policy in shaping the reproductive behavior of the population and the directions of development of social policy. Notable among the researchers in this field are R.A. Ubaydullaeva, L.P. Maksakova, A.S. Soliev, Z.N. Tojiev, X. Mamadalieva, and others.

Fundamental works by Russian scholars that explore the diverse aspects of population migration have also played a significant role in the formation and development of migration studies as a scientific discipline. These include, first and foremost, L.L. Rybakovsky's work *Factors and Causes of Migration of the Population and the Mechanism of Their Interrelation* [9], and S.V. Ryazantsev's *Labour Migration to Russia: Myths and Counterarguments* [10], among others.

In Uzbekistan, for many years, the issue of migration, especially labor migration, did not receive sufficient attention from the state. Until 2006, there were virtually no academic articles dedicated to labor migration. Among the early and important works are L.P. Maksakova's *Migration of the Population of Uzbekistan* (1986), *Migration of the Population: Problems of Regulation* (2000), and the monograph *Migration and Labor Markets in the Countries*, which holds a significant place in the literature.

In recent years, attention to issues of population migration has increased significantly. Regarding migration problems in Central Asia—particularly in Kazakhstan—partial research has also been carried out by Y. Sadovskaya and A. Veshkurova [6, p. 126]. Moreover, scientific articles and studies on the current state of migration have been conducted in English. For instance, the article *Migration Processes in Central Asia: Main Directions and Key Issues of Regional System*, authored by scholars from Al-Farabi National University in Kazakhstan, addresses debates about the formation and functioning of the regional migration system. The article examines key questions concerning the roles of sending and receiving countries within Central Asia, as well as the specific role of Russia and Kazakhstan in regional migration dynamics [4].

Addressing the issue of migration in Central Asian countries in conjunction with development perspectives implies a need to understand the role of local governments in migration policy, the support mechanisms for migrants, the protection of migrant rights, and the evolving dynamics of intergovernmental communication on migration issues. These topics are reflected in a brief study by CAREC Institute researcher

Giorgi Khishtovani titled *Reviewing Migration and Development: The Role of Local Authorities of Central Asia* [5, p. 54].

Furthermore, considerable scholarly attention has also been given to migration during the Soviet period. One such contribution is by the Tajik historian Kamoluddin Abdullaev. His article provides a historiographical analysis of English-language studies devoted to the history of emigration from Central Asia to neighboring Eastern countries during the first two decades of Soviet rule [15].

The impact of the COVID-19 pandemic and the war in Ukraine on migration processes in Central Asia has been briefly analyzed in the article by K. Maslanov and D. Tarasova, titled "Migration Flows from Central Asian Countries: New Challenges and Opportunities" [8]. According to the authors, the consequences of the events in Ukraine have altered the flow of migrants. Considering the interest of most Central Asian countries—namely Tajikistan, Uzbekistan, and to a lesser extent, Kyrgyzstan—in diversifying migration flows, the development of migration towards Europe may become increasingly active in the coming years. Western sanctions against Russia have led to a sharp decrease in remittances sent home by labor migrants—remittances that have long served as a primary source of income and food security for many households in these three republics.

Russian researcher V. Schensnovich, in his analytical study "Migration Features of Central Asian Countries" [16], has examined the peculiar characteristics of migration processes in the region. The article suggests that the migratory exchange between Tajikistan and various regions of Russia affects the ethnic composition of the local populations. In Kazakhstan, where educational migration and highly skilled labor resources are more developed, transformational movements towards other countries are taking place. In Kyrgyzstan, the population's migratory exchange with neighboring states has decreased, while it has increased with several countries outside the CIS. At the current stage, the regulation of external labor migration in Uzbekistan is necessitated by the presence of surplus labor resources.

Among the research works dealing with solutions to this issue, several other sources are worth noting. These include the works of Russian researcher A. Avdashkin and local scholars such as Z. Dadaboyeva, A. Jooshebekova, and Sh. Isakulov, who has analyzed various aspects of migration. Migration issues in Central Asia are also partially covered in the article by Kyrgyz scholar R. Beybutova [3]. In this article, topics such as ethnic migration and labor migration are

partially addressed. The author focuses on post-independence migration dynamics in Kyrgyzstan and also highlights the issue of illegal migration. According to her, the absence of strict passport control at the borders makes it easy to cross the Kyrgyz border using forged documents. This situation, in turn, transforms the country into a haven for various destabilizing elements, such as religious and criminal groups.

According to the works of Russian economist and migration researcher Azganush Migranyan, the study of the main directions of socio-demographic development in Central Asian countries is intrinsically linked to active migration processes. In her article on this topic, the main trends in migration processes in these countries are analyzed. Contradictions in migration regulation are examined, and the social indicators affected by migration are analyzed, including the dynamics of remittance flows and their impact on the standard of living of the population [20].

Migration issues are also discussed in the 2020 publication "Return Migration: International Approaches and Regional Specificities of Central Asia" [21]. This academic manual was prepared by a team of authors conducting research in six countries: Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, the Russian Federation, Tajikistan, Turkmenistan, and Uzbekistan. According to the manual, the scale of labor migration from Central Asia is considerable: between 2.7 and 4.2 million people (amounting to 10 to 16 percent of the economically active population) work abroad—in the Russian Federation, Kazakhstan, Turkey, the Republic of Korea, and many other countries. The book provides examples of how the potential of returning migrants has been utilized effectively, along with the challenges these returnees face upon reentering their home countries.

The book consists of four chapters that comprehensively address the issue of return migration. These chapters are logically structured, transitioning from theory to practice. The first chapter, titled "Return Migration in Contemporary Conditions," explores the theoretical aspects of return migration, including classifications and definitions, as well as the objectives and responsibilities of states in implementing return migration programs.

The second chapter, "Legal Foundations of Return Migration," examines international and regional legal documents related to return migration. It also discusses the legal bases of Voluntary Return and Reintegration Programs (VRRPs) and assesses their potential in the region.

The third chapter, "Conditions and Specificities of Return Migration in Central Asia," reveals the unique

demographic and migratory characteristics of the region, along with the causes and trends of return migration in Central Asian countries. This chapter also elaborates on the economic and socio-demographic impact of return migration, the adaptation and reintegration challenges faced by returnees, and the role of diasporas in the return migration potential of the region.

Finally, the chapter "Managing Return Migration and the Development of VRRPs in Central Asia" discusses the mechanisms of migration policy and the implementation of return migration within the framework of strategies for socio-economic development and employment promotion in the countries of the region. It also emphasizes the role of civil society institutions in the development of return migration and VRRPs in Central Asian countries.

Among local researchers who have addressed the issue of international migration are D. Ikromov and I. Isroilov. In addition, the Russian scholar Sergey Abashin has also expressed his views on this topic [1].

In his article on migration in Uzbekistan, Uzbek researcher Bobur Khonturaev presents relevant information on the topic [17]. The article analyzes the external migration of Uzbek citizens to distant foreign countries, including forms such as official permanent emigration, official temporary emigration, unofficial emigration, ecological emigration, and intellectual immigration. The migration of Uzbek citizens to CIS countries is studied separately in the following forms: labor migration (gastarbeiters and hired workers); official permanent migration (citizenship acquisition); temporary ethnic migration (working in the ethnic homeland); and intellectual migration (researchers, scientists, students).

Researcher Shahnoza Sultanova, in her article, discusses the concept of population migration, its socio-economic problems, and the political, legal, and global challenges of poverty and destitution in both the world and Uzbekistan during the pandemic. The article also presents logical perspectives on eliminating poverty and destitution through ensuring employment, developing entrepreneurship, and strengthening the economy [18].

In his article "The Role of Labor Migration in the Economy of Uzbekistan" [19], local researcher Farrukh Asraqulov highlights the causes behind migration processes in Uzbekistan and their development across regions. He also emphasizes the importance of ensuring peace, security, and stability on a global scale in the context of globalization.

The article "Population Migration in Uzbekistan" [2] addresses the geographic position of the Republic of

Uzbekistan, its status in the global community, migration flows, urbanization, the composition of urban and rural populations, and the number of cities. It covers the current state of migration processes, offers proposals, and identifies areas requiring greater attention.

The issue of ethnic migration and its impact on the ethnic composition of the population in the Central Asian states is also discussed in detail in a special article by Russian researcher T. Smirnova [22]. The study covers the period from the dissolution of the USSR to the present day. During this period, migration between Russia and Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, and Uzbekistan has had a significant impact on the ethnic composition of the population. As a result of intense migration processes in the Central Asian countries, the number and proportion of titular ethnic groups have increased, while the share of Russians, Ukrainians, Germans, and other ethnic groups has sharply declined. In the Russian Federation, Kazakh, Kyrgyz, Tajik, and Uzbek diasporas have emerged. The article provides data on the number and geographical distribution of these ethnic groups in Russia and the Central Asian states.

It is worth noting that in the Republic of Tajikistan, the issue of migration has been scarcely studied in academic circles, particularly in terms of methodology and within the framework of political science. The interest of local researchers in the problems of migration processes only began to emerge in the 1990s, following the collapse of the USSR. Publications by G. N. Zokirov, R. Ulmasov, I. Isroilov, M. Sh. Mahmadbekov, R. Mirsaidov, E. A. Nazarov, K. Odinaev, and others have focused on the political aspects of migration processes.

One of the notable academic works on migration movements in Tajikistan is the dissertation by Moyonsho Mahmadbekov titled "Migration Processes: Essence, Main Trends, and Their Features in Modern Society: The Experience of Tajikistan", in which the author attempts to analyze migration issues in Tajikistan in the second part of the study [23]. According to the author, a distinctive feature of labor migration in the Republic of Tajikistan is that it is both a cause and a consequence of the transformations that began in the country after gaining independence. In the global context of migration, such a dual but crucial role is not a new phenomenon in the historical development of society. In turn, under conditions of a changing society, this particular feature of labor migration in the Republic of Tajikistan has contributed to the development of new forms of labor migration, the transformation of its functions and significance, and a political reassessment of migration processes.

Among Uzbek scholars, researchers such as E. M. Muhiddinov, S. A. Ishanxodjaev, L. Kh. Isakov, and Sh. T. Tilyabaeva has studied the impact of migration on Uzbekistan, focusing on the social, legal, and political consequences of this phenomenon. In his academic investigations, F. Ya. Parmanov has examined the social factors influencing the transformation of migration processes and has emphasized the importance of improving the efficiency of institutions responsible for managing migration activities.

Furthermore, scholars such as D. A. Majidova, D. Gh. Khusanova, A. A. Bozarov, B. A. Akbarov, N. Kh. Zokhitova, M. Sh. Yakhnyayeva, N. M., Saydalieva, D. Muydinov, and S. Alimov have explored the socio-psychological aspects of supporting and reintegrating labor migrants and have provided scientific and practical recommendations [24].

Some issues related to labor migration in Uzbekistan during the years of independence are also discussed in the collection "Labor Migration in the Republic of Uzbekistan" (Трудовая миграция в Республике Узбекистан) [25]. This volume includes articles and studies prepared by leading experts in the field, focusing on both internal and external labor migration in Uzbekistan. Most of the published materials summarize the results of sociological surveys conducted in Uzbekistan in 2006–2007 on internal and external migration issues, and provide recommendations for improving the regulation of migration processes and ensuring the rights of labor migrants. A significant part of the research is devoted to the gender aspects of labor migration.

In the course of the study, it is noted that Kazakhstan and the Central Asian countries are the main migration donors to Russia, and that Central Asia has accounted for two-thirds of migration growth to Russia, mainly during the post-Soviet period, with the contributions of Kazakhstan and Central Asia being approximately equal.

The issue of labor migration in Central Asia is also addressed in the research of Russian scholar Zhanna Zayonchkovskaya, in her work entitled "Labor Migration in the CIS Countries: A Means of Adapting to Economic Crisis and a Source of New Challenges. Main Results of Cross-Country Studies" (Трудовая миграция в странах СНГ: средство адаптации к экономическому кризису и источник новых вызовов. Главные итоги межстрановых исследований) [26]. The author largely attempts to defend labor migration from groundless criticisms and to provide reliable evidence demonstrating its significant social role during periods of crisis. In the second stage, risks associated with labor migration

were also examined. Overall, the study attempts to provide a comprehensive characterization of the process.

The article "Problems of External Labor Migration of the Population in Central Asian Countries" (Проблемы внешней трудовой миграции населения стран Центральной Азии) by U. J. Ergeshbayev, a researcher at Osh State University, examines the main features of the current state of labor migration from Central Asian countries to Russia [27]. The main sources of labor migration from the region are three countries: Uzbekistan, Tajikistan, and Kyrgyzstan. According to various estimates, by the end of 2005, there were between 1.8 and 3.5 million labor migrants from Central Asia, with nine-tenths of them originating from the aforementioned countries. Specialized research on this topic is gradually being developed.

In the article "Modernization of the Institutional System for Managing Labor Migration Processes" (Модернизация институциональной системы управления процессами трудовой миграции) by Uzbek researcher Farhod Parmanov, methodological recommendations and practical proposals are presented on organizing the modernization of the institutional system responsible, directly or indirectly, for the optimization of labor migration processes by Uzbekistan's "Action Strategy" for 2017–2021 [28].

CONCLUSION

In conclusion, it should be emphasized that migration processes in Central Asian countries are influenced by a complex set of socio-economic, political, and cultural factors. The dissolution of the Soviet Union marked a turning point in the ethnic structure of the region, with significant demographic shifts due to the mass emigration of non-titular ethnic groups and the consolidation of titular nations. While local scholars have contributed valuable insights, their studies often reflect a nation-centered and ideologically influenced perspective. In contrast, foreign research tends to offer relatively objective assessments, yet relying solely on external theoretical frameworks can limit context-specific understanding.

Therefore, it is crucial to develop interdisciplinary approaches that synthesize local empirical data with global theories, allowing for a more comprehensive and balanced analysis of migration dynamics. Future research should focus on the long-term socio-political consequences of migration, the evolving role of diasporas, and the integration strategies of migrant populations. Moreover, regional cooperation among Central Asian countries and partnerships with international academic institutions are essential for developing sustainable migration policies rooted in

mutual understanding and shared development goals.

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