



LABOR MIGRATION IN CENTRAL ASIA

Will Kazakhstan Be the Anchor for Stability?

By Reuel R. Hanks and Bolat L. Tatibekov



Political map of Kazakhstan. Source: The Nations Online Project at <https://tinyurl.com/orwlqbf>.

Labor Migration in Post-Soviet Central Asia

The five former Soviet states of Uzbekistan, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, and Turkmenistan may collectively be referred to as Central Asia. In the quarter-century since these countries gained independence, their geopolitical importance has become obvious. Not only does this region serve as a classic buffer zone between Russia and the turmoil in Afghanistan and Pakistan, but they also hold large reserves of hydrocarbon and hydroelectric energy, and lie directly astraddle China's massive One Belt, One Road (OBOR) initiative. Linking Europe, the Middle East, East Asia, and South Asia, Central Asia serves as both conduit and insulator between these vital regions. Kazakhstan has the largest area, economy, and the second-largest population, and is critical to the economic stability of the entire region.

Advances in automation notwithstanding, a sufficient amount of labor remains a key component to any growing economy. During the Soviet period, labor migration was limited in the region, but after independence, considerable numbers of workers initiated both intraregional and interregional movement across the former Soviet space. This migration was facilitated by the fact that a large proportion of the labor force shared a number of common characteristics, most importantly the Russian language.

Indeed, the wide use of Russian had some negative consequences, as this meant that Slavs, who now found themselves in the minority in all the new Central Asian states, could easily depart to the Slavic portions of the former USSR. In the early days of independence, labor migration was, in fact, detrimental to the economic stability and development of the Central Asian states. Large numbers of highly skilled professionals, mostly ethnic Slavs, departed the entire region, and especially Kazakhstan, for Russia, Ukraine, or countries farther abroad. Other groups, such as a sizable minority of ethnic Germans, had begun an exodus in the 1980s prior to independence. The last Soviet census conducted in 1989 indicated that 37 percent of Kazakhstan's population was ethnically Russian; data from 2016 show that the percentage of Russians has fallen to slightly over 20 percent.¹

The negative impact of this migration was proportional to the percentage of Slavic workers in the particular country. For example, in Uzbekistan, where only about 6 percent of the population was ethnically Russian at independence, the "brain drain" of Slavic professionals was felt less acutely, although even in this instance it must be noted that the geographic distribution of this cohort exacerbated the harmful effect. This was because a disproportionate share of Russians lived in the country's urban areas, especially Tashkent, and worked in industry, business, or the professions. The loss of these workers had a more serious impact on the economy than if they had been employed in agriculture, for example, especially since labor in that sector was notoriously underproductive on a per capita basis.

In Kazakhstan, however, the emigration of Russian labor was much more consequential. A number of historical factors, including several waves of Slavic immigration, extending from the late nineteenth century to the so-called Virgin Lands campaign promulgated by Nikita Khrushchev in the 1950s, had dramatically increased the percentage of Slavic groups in the Kazakh Soviet Socialist Republic (SSR) by the late 1980s, although some data indicate that Slavs were migrating out of Kazakhstan even prior to the collapse of Soviet authority. This succession of Slavic settlers into Kazakhstan, along with the catastrophic decline of the Kazakh population during the collectivization of agriculture in the 1930s, had the effect of actually making the Kazakhs less than a majority in their titular republic by the 1970s. Nearly a million people perished during collectivization from 1928 to 1934 in the Kazakh SSR, and the great majority of those lost were ethnic Kazakhs, who fiercely resisted the Soviet authorities.²

Thus, in the early 1990s, Russians and other Slavs made up close to 40 percent of the population in Kazakhstan. As in Uzbekistan, the geographic distribution of this group is key to its importance in the economy. The Russian population in Kazakhstan is highly concentrated in the northern oblasts (regions), in what is the industrial heartland of the

Kazakhstan: Major Ethnic Group Composition Change from 1989 to 2014

Ethnic Group	1989		2014	
	Number	%	Number	%
Kazakhs	6,534,616	39.7	11,244,547	65.5
Russians	6,227,549	37.8	3,685,009	21.5
Uzbeks	332,017	2.0	521,252	3.0
Ukrainians	896,240	5.4	301,346	1.8
Uygurs	185,301	1.1	246,777	1.4
Tatars	327,982	2.0	203,108	1.2
Germans	957,518	5.8	181,928	1.1
Koreans	103,315	0.6	105,400	0.6
Turks	49,567	0.3	104,792	0.6
Azerbaijanis	90,083	0.5	98,646	0.6
Dungans	182,601	1.1	62,029	0.4
Belarusians	30,165	0.2	60,295	0.4
Kurds	25,425	0.2	42,312	0.3
Tajiks	25,514	0.2	42,143	0.3
Poles	59,956	0.4	32,661	0.2
Chechens	49,507	0.3	32,252	0.2
Kyrgyz	14,112	0.1	29,803	0.2

Source: Based on data available at the Kazakhstan Ministry of National Economy Statistics Committee website at <https://tinyurl.com/y7uwbwwr>.

country. Some southern urban areas, especially the city of Almaty, also hold sizable clusters of Russians. The emigration of Russians accelerated after independence in 1991, when Kazakh President Nursultan Nazarbayev implemented policies designed to restore the Kazakh language and culture from the second-class status they had suffered under the Soviet administration.³ The Kazakh language, for example, was made the official language of the new state, although the regime was careful to award Russian the official position of "language of interethnic communication." In the early years of independence, the outflow of ethnic Russians, many of them highly educated professionals, technicians, and managers, was substantial. The departure of the Russian labor force was seen as such a crisis that articles appeared in the Kazakh press imploring the Russian minority to remain in Kazakhstan.⁴

The loss of labor was especially problematic given that Kazakhstan's petroleum industry in the early 1990s was expanding at an exponential rate, and the country held less than seventeen million people on a territory comparable in size to the portion of the United States east of the Mississippi River. The country witnessed a serious decline in population during



Migrant workers in Kazakhstan. From the video Valeriy Kaliyev: *Migrant Workers in Kazakhstan*. Source: Open Society Foundation's YouTube video at <https://tinyurl.com/yd2f6jtv>. Photo by Valeriy Kaliyev.

the first decade of independence. Between 1992 and 2002, the total population of Kazakhstan dropped from 16,451,000 to 14,846,000, a loss of 10 percent in only a decade.⁵ Indeed, the problem of labor was viewed as so critical that Kazakhstan pursued policies aimed at enticing ethnic Kazakhs to return from surrounding regions, the so-called *oralmanlar*, to bolster the new country's population, as well as increase the percentage of ethnic Kazakhs in the country. In 2010, the Nazarbayev government even proposed a program to provide long-term leases of agricultural land in southern Kazakhstan to thousands of Chinese farm workers, a suggestion that was overwhelmingly unpopular among the country's citizens, and which was eventually abandoned.⁶

The Economics of Extremism

Ironically, Kazakhstan's labor woes may offer a path to stabilizing the regional economy in Central Asia, leading to broader economic development across the region. This stabilization may be achieved by Kazakhstan offering employment opportunities to labor migrants from its three neighbors: Uzbekistan, Tajikistan, and Kyrgyzstan, all of which have a history of struggling economies and excess labor supply. This, in turn, would have the potential result of minimizing the attraction of radical, anti-Western

rhetoric emanating from the websites and pulpits of extremist Islamic groups. It should be emphasized that such groups have a limited appeal to youth in the region, but some violent groups have materialized in the twenty-five years since independence. These organizations have been composed primarily of Uzbeks and Tajiks, with a smattering of Kyrgyz, Kazakhs, and Turkmen involved. This ethnic composition is relevant and revealing in that the primary sources of recruitment for radical groups in Central Asia are those countries that have not succeeded in providing employment opportunities to many of their young men.

A case in point is the historically most violent radical group in Central Asia, the Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan (IMU).⁷ The IMU emerged from the organization known as "Adolat" in the late 1990s in the city of Namangan in eastern Uzbekistan. For a brief period, Adolat represented a serious challenge

to the authority of Uzbek President Islam Karimov, but Karimov promptly cracked down on the group, driving its leadership out of the country and eventually into an alliance with the Taliban and al-Qaeda. The IMU mounted several armed incursions into Uzbekistan and Kyrgyzstan from bases in Tajikistan and Afghanistan between 1999 and 2001, and may have been responsible for a mass bombing in Tashkent in February 1999. The IMU and its splinter groups drew recruits who were almost exclusively Uzbek, with much smaller numbers from the other major Central Asian ethnic groups. At its apogee, the IMU had several thousand men under arms in the region, although combat deaths and the loss of bases in northern Afghanistan have reduced the organization's influence and activities considerably.⁸

Although it sponsored the most spectacular incidents of extremist violence in the 1990s and early 2000s, the IMU has been largely replaced by other radical Islamic groups in the Central Asian states. These include ISIS and Hizb-ut-Tahrir (HT), along with a number of splinter groups and unrelated organizations. Several "ISIS-inspired" acts of violence have shaken Kazakhstan in recent years. In June 2016, a mob of armed young men stormed a military base in the city of Aktobe, resulting in twenty-five

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deaths. A month later, a gunman opened fire on a police station in Almaty, killing ten people. Kazakh security forces claim to have foiled at least eight more planned “terrorist” attacks that year. Outside the region, Central Asian extremists have joined ISIS in Syria and Iraq. The Soufan Group, an independent think tank, estimated in 2017 that as many as 1,500 Uzbeks were fighting in the ranks of ISIS in the Middle East.

It must be highlighted that the sputtering and stagnant economies of Uzbekistan and Tajikistan are not the sole, and likely not even the main, reason that young Uzbeks and Tajiks have made up the largest share of extremist groups. Historically, the urbanized Uzbeks and Tajiks had a much higher level of Islamic religiosity than the nomadic Kazakhs, Kyrgyz, and Turkmen. Many of the latter were not converted to Islam until the eighteenth century, and the great Kazakh man of letters, Cholkan Valikhanov, noted in the nineteenth century that “Islam had failed to enter the blood” of his ethnic brethren. Therefore, it is generally accepted among both Western scholars and those residing in the region that Uzbeks and Tajiks are “more Islamic” than the traditionally nomadic peoples of the region.⁹

But the economic factor in the radicalization of Central Asian youth cannot be disregarded. One of the few studies that directly interviewed soldiers from the IMU revealed that many young Uzbeks joined the organization not from a commitment to radical Islamic beliefs, but for economic reasons.¹⁰ When the IMU was receiving financial support from the Taliban and Osama bin Laden in the late 1990s, and was supplementing this funding with profits taken from drug smuggling operations, the IMU was able to pay its soldiers wages that significantly exceeded those offered on the collective farms in rural Uzbekistan and elsewhere in the region. Moreover, unemployment rates in the rural areas of Uzbekistan, Tajikistan, and western Kyrgyzstan may have been higher than 20 percent in the early 2000s. While some radicals in Central Asia are indeed committed ideologues, there is little doubt that a significant number of the IMU’s supporters arrived not as committed Islamic ideologues, but rather as economic migrants, seeking employment or at least higher wages than those obtainable at home. Frustrated, economically and socially marginalized young men (and, increasingly, women as well) in Central Asia are drawn to the utopian visions of those who seek to create an Islamic state (caliphate) in Central Asia or elsewhere, partially because of the egalitarian society such visions promise.

Migration’s Role in Political Stabilization

The labor supply and demand regimes of Kazakhstan and its neighbors have been complementary for much of the period of independence. High rates of population growth in Uzbekistan and Tajikistan, already in place prior to Soviet disintegration, have generated excess labor supply in economies that have failed to rapidly expand and produce sufficient employment opportunities for many entering the workforce. In Kazakhstan, declining population and an exodus of skilled labor, in tandem with a high rate of foreign investment and high rates of economic growth, led to a deficit of labor. For the past fifteen years, sizable numbers of labor migrants from the tier of states to Kazakhstan’s immediate south have flowed into the country.

The number of migrant workers moving into Kazakhstan has shifted somewhat over the past twenty years, with the total number of guest workers peaking around 2007. Prior to the Russian invasion of Ukraine and the subsequent imposition of international sanctions against Moscow, Kazakhstan attracted up to 1.2 million labor migrants. Since 2014, because of



Kazakhstan economic update from fall 2017. Source: Graphic from the article “Kazakhstan’s Economy Is Rising—Is Still All About Oil” on *The World Bank* website at <https://tinyurl.com/y7gy4d73>.

the sanctions’ effect on the Russian economy, Kazakhstan’s most important trading partner, and the simultaneous decline in global oil prices, Kazakhstan’s economy has been contracting for several years. Subsequently, the number of migrants in Kazakhstan has dropped dramatically over the past four years. The GDP growth rate for Kazakhstan’s economy dropped from 6 percent in 2013 to 1 percent in 2016.

The best estimates indicate that the great majority of these workers had previously arrived from Kazakhstan’s “poor” neighbors, with some data indicating that as many as 85 percent of the country’s migrant labor force came from Uzbekistan, Tajikistan, and Kyrgyzstan, a total figure of approximately 1,020,000, representing close to 15 percent of the entire labor force. This is the percentage for those in Kazakhstan *legally*, and it is assumed by

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most scholars and government officials that the number of illegal workers is at least equal to the figure of those working legally. Thus, up to 30 percent of Kazakhstan's labor force may be composed of immigrants from its southern neighbors.

The number of immigrant laborers from Uzbekistan and Tajikistan is quite remarkable, given that before 2013 there was no legal framework for migrants from these countries to work long term in Kazakhstan. Uzbeks and Tajiks either stayed in Kazakhstan illegally or engaged in "rotational migration," working up to the limit of their visas (typically thirty days) and then rotating out of the country for a period, only to return for another thirty-day stint as soon as possible. This is actually a more profitable employment pattern for many Uzbeks and Tajiks than taking a similar job in their home countries, especially those working in the manual labor sector. Average wages in Kazakhstan are almost ten times higher than in Tajikistan and estimated to be six to seven times higher than in Uzbekistan.

The potential of Kazakhstan to produce employment opportunities for the entire Central Asian region has been masked by the economic downturn since 2014. However, at some point, possibly in the near future, global oil prices will rebound and the economic limitations imposed on the Vladimir Putin regime by the US, EU, and others will be relaxed or lifted. Supported by the revenues coming from its large oil fields, the economy of Kazakhstan will be poised for extensive growth. The labor to support that expansion is available from only one source—the neighboring states lying along the country's southern margin.

Efforts such as the Eurasian Economic Union notwithstanding,¹¹ a unified labor market allowing for the free transfer of labor across state boundaries in Central Asia would benefit the entire region economically. It would also have the likely effect of reducing the potential appeal of radical Islamic dogma to many young Central Asians. It is impossible to quantify the reduction in potential recruits to fringe religious groups as a result of increased employment opportunities, and it would be naïve to assume that such integration would completely eliminate the attraction extremism holds for some youth in the region. However, recent scholarship supports the theory that economic deprivation may contribute substantially to the rise of radical Islam.¹² Improved economic opportunities for young Uzbeks, Tajiks, and others would almost certainly mitigate, if not negate, the growth of Islamic extremism.

Important changes in the political landscape of Central Asia have recently taken place. After decades of tensions, Uzbekistan's new president, Shavkat Mirziyoyev, has moved to dramatically improve his country's relationship with neighbors Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan. This has led to the resurrection of the concept of a single economic space in Central Asia, an idea that may prove vital in advancing both economic development and political stability for the whole of Central Asia. Kazakhstan, the region's most powerful economy, stands at the center of such potential integration. Increased economic integration among the five states of Central Asia holds the promise to bolster trade linkages to surrounding states like Russia and Afghanistan, and in conjunction with China's OBOR initiative may stimulate an increase in economic standards that nullifies the appeal of radical agendas among the region's youth.¹³ But in order to achieve these goals, two challenges must be addressed: do the current leaders of the Central Asian states recognize this potential, and do they have the willpower, wherewithal, and vision to see it come to fruition? ■

NOTES

1. Bolat L. Tatibekov and Reuel R. Hanks, *Gravity Model of Ethnic Migration and Its Manifestation in Kazakhstan* (Kaskelen: Kazakhstan, Suleyman Demirel University, 2017), 29.
2. A substantial amount of research on this period has been conducted by both Western and, more recently, Kazakh scholars. Robert Conquest's *Harvest of Sorrow*, directed primarily at the Holodomor in Ukraine, offers a chapter devoted entirely to the

simultaneous devastation in *Kazakhstan* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1986). A recent assessment by Kazakh scholars based on archival records from the Karaganda region is A.I. Ongarbaeva and Z.G. Saktaganov, "Some Fragments of the Collectivization of Agriculture in Central Kazakhstan in 1930s," *Series: History and Philosophy* (rough English translation) 82, no. 2 (2016): 69–74. Available at <https://tinyurl.com/ybvemvge>.

3. Reuel R. Hanks, "Directions in the Ethnic Politics of Kazakhstan: Concession, Compromise or Catastrophe?" *Journal of Third World Studies* 15, no. 1 (1998): 143–162.
4. For one example, see Aidar Adilbekov, "Don't Go, Your Home is Here," *Kazakhstanskaya Pravda*, December 8, 1994, 2.
5. See the chart in Bolat L. Tatibekov and Reuel R. Hanks, 33.
6. A public opinion survey conducted in Kazakhstan by the International Republican Institute and Gallup in 2010 found that a staggering 81 percent of those surveyed were against leasing land to Chinese farmers, a rare repudiation of public policy in authoritarian Kazakhstan. See page 19 of the "National Public Opinion Poll" conducted by the International Republican Institute and the Gallup Organization (funded by USAID), April 2010.
7. We do not include Afghanistan in the term "Central Asia" in this calculation; we are only considering those groups who have committed acts of terrorism within the borders of the former Soviet republics.
8. We are not suggesting that the IMU has been rendered impotent or irrelevant. The group continues to be a menace to stability and peace in the broader region, as evidenced by a well-planned attack on the Karachi airport in June 2014. Recent intelligence indicates that the group has been reduced to approximately 200–300 fighters and is almost wholly dependent on the support of Pakistani extremist warlords.
9. Having spent considerable time in Kazakhstan over the past decade, the authors can anecdotally observe that female Kazakh friends and colleagues will readily note, when pressed on the matter of Islamic religiosity and practice, that "our women never wore the veil," unlike the case among the ancestors of the modern Uzbeks and Tajiks. They will also express proudly that in traditional Kazakh society, women frequently held considerable social and political power.
10. See Martha Brill Olcott, *Roots of Radical Islam in Central Asia* (Washington, DC: Carnegie Endowment for Peace, 2007).
11. Some Central Asian states have remained outside the structure of the Eurasian Economic Union, as the organization is seen by some leaders as an effort by Moscow to dominate and control the economies of the region. There is also the potential detriment of holding ties that are too close to Russia, made clear in Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan in the aftermath of sanctions imposed on Moscow after 2014.
12. A compelling argument on this point is presented in Alan Richards, *Socio-Economic Roots of Radicalism: Towards Explaining the Appeal of Islamic Radicals* (Collingdale, PA: DIANE Publishing, 2003).
13. Some argue that Kazakhstan is positioning itself as the "capital" of the Chinese project. See Udi Shaham, "Kazakhstan Seeks Role as Capital of 'New Silk Road,'" *Jerusalem Post*, June 26, 2017.

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