

Perspectives | Kazakhstan is Central Asia's migration outlier

In recent years, Kazakhstan has switched from sending migrants abroad to receiving them instead.

By Sarah Calderone

Originally published by EurasiaNet, 3rd May 2018

Central Asian states are collectively known as a wellspring of migrants, most of whom leave in search of work in Russia. But Kazakhstan is an outlier: The country in recent years has gone from a sending to a receiving state, and, in the process, appears to be altering the economic balance in the region.

The tipping point for Kazakhstan occurred within the last decade or so; a lack of reliable hard data makes it difficult to say exactly when. Up until at least the mid-2000s, Kazakhstan, like other Central Asian states, experienced a net outflow of migrants. In recent years, however, it has registered more people coming than going.

The United Nations [estimates](#) that total net migration for Kazakhstan flattened out between 2010 and 2015. Similar [findings](#) by Sergei Ryazantsev, a Russian migration scholar, indicate that Kazakhstan's migration numbers flipped even earlier, going from a deficit of 108,000 in 2000 (meaning there were 108,000 more emigrants than immigrants that year) to a surplus of 22,000 in 2005.

A burst of labor in-migration has accompanied Kazakhstan's overall migration shift, fueled in part by explosive growth in the construction sector. While the country has experienced a modest influx of labor migrants since 2000, the official number doubled in 2010 and has kept climbing. As a result, Kazakhstan now enjoys an enhanced degree of regional economic clout. And Kazakhstani authorities are better positioned than their neighbors to resist Russia's [efforts to leverage](#) labor migrants to coerce Central Asian states into supporting the Kremlin's economic and political agenda.

Countries like Kyrgyzstan, Uzbekistan and Tajikistan, which together send millions of labor migrants to Russia each year, are vulnerable to Russian political pressure. The economies of Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan are [especially dependent](#) on remittances sent home by labor migrants. According to the most recent data available, [cash transfers](#) from Russia account for the equivalent of almost 37 percent of Tajikistan's GDP. Labor migration was also a major factor in [Kyrgyzstan](#) joining the Kremlin-dominated Eurasian Economic Union, which came into being in 2015.

The uptick in labor migration to Kazakhstan can be attributed, in part, to Russia's economic woes; the Russian economy went into a [downward spiral](#) following the 2014 plunge in energy prices. At the same time, Russian officials also tightened [regulations](#) for labor migrants.

Elena Sadovskaya, an Almaty-based migration expert, noted that a considerable number of labor migrants from neighboring Central Asian states now see Kazakhstan as offering better employment prospects than Russia. At the same time, she believes the shift is temporary, and that Russia will regain any [lost stature](#) as a labor migration magnet as soon as its economy picks up again.

“The number of labor migrants to Russia shrunk in 2015 and 2016, and some of them definitely headed to Kazakhstan, but not in such volumes to talk about a reorientation of the flow,” Sadovskaya told Eurasianet.

But Ryazantsev, the Russian scholar, feels that Russia might be forced to compete over labor resources with Kazakhstan. One significant factor to consider is the issue of discrimination: Unlike [Russia](#), where migrants from Central Asia often must grapple with [xenophobic attitudes](#) held by Russian citizens, Kazakhstan offers a more familiar and tolerant environment for labor migrants. Ainur Mazhitova, of the Public Opinion Research Institute in Astana notes that Kazakhstan's language and cultural similarities make it far easier for labor migrants from other Central Asian states to adapt.

Determining the number of labor migrants coming to Kazakhstan is tricky business. Tatiana Hadjiemmanuel, the head of the International Organization for Migration's office in Almaty, [estimated](#) the overall total of labor migrants in Kazakhstan stood at 2 million in 2017; the vast majority come from neighboring states. Undocumented migrants tend to far outnumber officially registered guest workers.

The Kazakhstani government has tried to keep up. A 2006 amnesty enabled roughly 165,000 illegal labor migrants to formalize their status. Legislative changes in 2013 then paved the way for another wave of illegal migrants to obtain proper working papers. Lately, authorities have been trying to make it [easier](#) for skilled foreign workers to settle in Kazakhstan.

Kazakhstan's present migration pattern is sharply different from that which prevailed during its early years of independence. From 1991-2004, just over 2 million people [emigrated](#) from Kazakhstan, roughly 13 percent of the country's population at the time of independence. Most were ethnic Russians who resettled in Russia. Over the last decade, the outflow to Russia and other Slavic states has largely stopped.

At the same time, Kazakhstan has encouraged ethnic Kazakhs from across Eurasia, including those in China and Mongolia, to return to their titular homeland. Those efforts have registered mixed results. However, recent administrative changes have attracted a larger influx of ethnic Kazakhs, known as [oralman](#).

Kazakhstan's relatively small population and abundance of natural resources have saved it from developing the large pools of unemployed, unskilled laborers found in neighboring countries. Instead, according to Sadovskaya, these days those who leave Kazakhstan tend to be highly qualified workers “in search of higher education and salaries, which is generally positive and favorable for Kazakhstan.” Astana surely hopes they return.

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