

Regional integration and freedom of movement of workers in Central Asia

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Lack of employment opportunities, recessing economy, considerable differences in development between the region's countries, as well as political instability, force Central Asian workers to seek employment abroad. Labour migration in the region is a new phenomenon, relevant to globalisation processes, on one side, and having its particular features, on the other. Central Asia has many favourable conditions for creating freedom of movement for workers, such as common historical and cultural values, cognate languages, and - which is not to be ignored – relative tolerance of a host country inhabitants towards migrants that are ethnically close to them. Nevertheless, labour migrants' situation, and especially that of unskilled ones, often remains deplorable. Due to the fact that migrants are citizens of a certain country moving to and working in another one, their conditions depend both on the sending country policies and on these of the receiving one.

One has to admit that legislation framework on coordination of migration policies adopted under Commonwealth of Independent States in early 1990s, as well as the 1994 Agreement on cooperation in area of labour migration and social protection of labour migrants are literally not working. Recently activated regional organisations, such as EurAsEC, do not place migration issues on top of their agendas. Comparing to other areas of integration, like energy and water resources, in which Central Asian states are more interested, labour migration directly influences ordinary citizens' incomes: for instance, remittances sent home by Kyrgyz and Tajik migrants equal one-fourth of their home countries' GDPs.

Where does a weak migration policy at intergovernmental level lead? How can migrants' situation be improved?

Intergovernmental management of labour migration

Economic integration, which is the aim of majority of post-Soviet countries, implies step-by-step approach, such as creation of a free trade area first, customs union second (with a common tax for third countries' imports), and eventually a common market with free movement of goods,

capital, services and **labour**. This gradual approach, where freedom of movement of labour force is a long-term goal, is not suitable for Central Asian reality. A strict implementation of the step-by-step approach would lead to a situation similar to that in those integrating regions, where ties between sending and receiving countries existed long before the adoption of legislative framework on freedom of movement.

Waiting long for actions by integration organisations leads to following negative sides of labour migration:

First, level of coordination on issues of bilateral agreements on labour migration in Central Asia is very low. Both sending and receiving countries must show more interest in obtaining realistic figures on labour market demand, and in informing potential migrants on employment opportunities. An example of quotas, announced by Kazakh government, reveals the latter's imprecise assessment of labour shortage in the quickly developing economy. Due to absence of a formal information system on employment opportunities abroad potential migrants learn about them from other sources which may be old and unsafe.

Second, slow-paced integration encourages a receiving country to consider migrants' situation solely according to its laws, since there are no binding supranational documents. For instance, lack of harmonisation of laws on working conditions, on anti-discrimination and on social protection (including on pensions and medical services) lead to the fact that migrants are treated as foreign citizens deprived of their rights. These are also reasons behind low wages, discrimination and abuse by employers who often remain unpunished for illegal recruitment and bad treatment of undocumented labour migrants.

Third, and especially with reproach to sending countries, little lobbying is made for migrants' interests. Despite fragmentary actions of diplomatic representations and public organisations defending compatriots abroad, other government bodies make little effort on coordination of the issues with relevant agencies in receiving countries. Shortcoming of this inactivity is also the fact that migration is still considered mainly a matter of law-enforcement agencies that focus on apprehension of illegal migrants, whereas social component of migration becomes more dramatic.

And, finally, in addition to difficult situation of migrants in receiving country, complicated transit within the region creates ever more obstacles. Constant clarification on aim of a visit by border guards and bureaucratic procrastination in obtaining a work permit and a registration add by depressing a person who is already challenged by necessity to seek application of his/her skills abroad. In this regard, freer controls at borders (which are also a part of an integrating process) are unlikely to be established in Central Asia, due to its vicinity to rogue states and a threat of extremist thoughts' spread.

The abovementioned factors and other secondary considerations should encourage Central Asian states to leave behind passive waiting of regional integration results and to move towards creation of efficient **bilateral** means in management of migration flows.

Ways towards a mutually beneficial cooperation

In other integrating entities, such as the European Union, common legislation on freedom of movement of workers had not led to a considerable increase in internal migrant flows in the area, but eased entry conditions and improved employment conditions of European labour migrants. Taking into consideration this fact and a slow integration in Central Asia, Kyrgyzstan should concentrate on the following:

1. Enhancement of coordination with receiving countries of the region on issues of quota increase for labour migrants from Kyrgyzstan, also by conclusion of bilateral agreements.
2. Financing and creation of information sources on employment opportunities; allocation of space in national mass media for publication of announcements (with direct involvement of receiving countries); active use of mass media in order to inform potential migrants on employment conditions and legal regimes in receiving countries.
3. Speeding up harmonisation of laws on social protection of labour migrants in direct coordination with other countries of the region, as well as promotion of legislation on migrants' pensions and social allocations.

4. Reduction of bureaucratic procrastination on issue of identification documents for potential migrants, which are indispensable for registration and obtaining a work permit abroad.
5. Support to diasporas, public foundations and representations, assisting compatriots in a receiving country. In this regard, a positive development is the decision of the Kyrgyz government on appointment of personnel of State Committee on Migration within Kyrgyz diplomatic representations abroad.
6. Taking into consideration growing number of foreign citizens working in Kyrgyzstan, the latter should pay more attention to its immigration policy, relevant to traditional immigration societies in order to ensure a “brain drain”, easy registration and obtaining of work permit.

Sending country's lack of interest in protection of its citizens abroad, and the only intention to gain benefits from migrant remittances, may lead to deplorable results when a country loses its most skilful workers. Central Asian leaders often forget about benefits of bilateral and multilateral cooperation for citizens first and foremost. Many countries that have become labour force suppliers stopped feeling inferiority in comparison with countries that receive their migrant-citizens. These working abroad citizens have become major investors into their home countries' economies, which is appreciated by their governments and is accompanied by close ties with diaspora and receiving countries' authorities dealing with labour migration policies.