

Analysis

Leaving and Being Left Behind: Labor Migration in Georgia

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Abstract

A survey of labor migration in two villages shows contrasting trends as some migrants seek long-term employment, while others are primarily interested in temporary jobs. However, recent political and economic developments have greatly influenced these patterns. While fewer men now seek construction work in the Russian Federation, women still find employment as maids and nannies in Italy and Greece. The result is changing gender roles in the village. Remittances are declining, having a negative impact on Georgia's economy overall.

Russia Cracks Down

On 14 October 2006, the Russian immigration office and the Federal Security Service (FSB) branches in Dagestan jointly launched the special operation "Avtostrada," with the goal of cracking down on illegal labor migrants. During this operation, the authorities detained the Georgian citizen Giorgi Gogitidze (name changed) and deported him to Georgia, even though he held a valid one-year visa. He had not registered in Dagestan, however, and consequently violated Russian residence regulations.

According to Gogitidze, he tried to register, but was unable to do so because the Dagestani administration refused his request, even when offered bribes. In earlier years, registration was never a major obstacle for Gogitidze, but after Georgia arrested four alleged Russian spies in the summer of 2006, things became difficult for Georgians like him who came to the Russian Federation as seasonal workers. He heard about mass deportations of Georgians from Moscow and St. Petersburg in the news, and his inability to register turned him into a potential deportee, too. Before he was actually deported to Georgia, Gogitidze said that he was held at a camp close to the Dagestani border for a couple of days and forced to work. Yet, his main complaint was that he was not able to secure the money he had expected to earn in Dagestan to support his family.

The case of Gogitidze is far from unique. According to Georgian sources, approximately 4,000 Georgians were deported between September 2006 and February 2007 on grounds of violating the Russian residency rules. After their return home, however, many of the deportees managed to enter the Russian Federation again, despite being officially banned from the country for a couple of years. Some of them bribed the border guards, but most considered the border between Georgia and the Russian Federation too difficult to cross. Consequently, most Georgian labor migrants took other routes, either via Ukraine (a country they can enter without a visa),

or South Ossetia. The latter route was considered relatively safe, but expensive. According to Gogitidze, one had to pay approximately \$1,500 on the way to diverse state employees and other authorities.

After the outbreak of war between Russia and Georgia in August 2008, the South Ossetian transit corridor to the Russian Federation ceased to exist. At the same time, the world economic crisis crippled other countries favored by Georgian labor migrants, such as Spain. The combination of events has had severe consequences for the many Georgian families dependent on incomes generated abroad, as well as for the Georgian economy in general.

In the following sections, we sketch the current state of migration affairs in two Georgian villages and outline the local consequences of international and national politics. In our conclusion, we extrapolate from the comparison of our two field sites to identify general trends regarding labor migration in Georgia. The empirical data for this comparison come from our one-year fieldwork conducted in the two respective villages in 2006/07 within the framework of the research group 'Caucasian Boundaries and Citizenship from Below' at the Max Planck Institute for Social Anthropology.

Migration in Sats'ire (Western Georgia)

Sats'ire is located in the Tq'ibuli district (Western Georgia), which has the highest rate of outmigration in Georgia. Within the last twenty years, the population in Tq'ibuli city has dropped from 22,000 to 13,900 persons, and the decline in Sats'ire is equally dramatic. Forty-six of the officially registered 275 households have left the village, meaning that roughly one fifth of the families are now gone. Twenty-seven of the 100 households we interviewed in Sats'ire (2007) have migrants residing either abroad, or in the Georgian capital Tbilisi (qualified by the villagers as "migrants", too). The overall number of migrants from these families is 48.

The gender and age distributions of the migrants say a lot about the general pattern of migration. 75% of migrants are men and 25% are women. The largest group of migrants (41.7%) is between 31 and 40 years old. Accordingly, middle-aged males make up most of the migrants. Their absence from their native villages and the disproportionately high number of women, children, and old men who remain have drastically changed the structure of labor power at the local level.

The educational background of the migrants contradicts popular “brain drain” arguments, since only 25% of the Satsire migrants had higher education. We should note, however, that higher education is more common in Georgian cities, than villages. Additionally, the specific features of the Tkibuli District have to be taken into account. During Soviet times, it was a highly industrial area, acquiring less qualified labor power, which influenced the number of people with higher education. Post-soviet Georgia liquidated the enterprises (mines, factories, agricultural units), where the majority of the local population worked, and jobs for poorly qualified labor became a scarce resource. Before migrating, the local migrants were mostly employed within state institutions (35.4%) or were unemployed (35.4%).

In their host countries, half of the migrants live without legal documents. The lack of appropriate papers is the first restraint for the migrants, since it deprives them of access to lucrative and legal employment, and forces them to take jobs for unskilled workers (39,6% of migrants are construction workers). The villagers have some ideas about which destinations are more profitable or easily accessible, but the decision on where to go depends on various factors: having social connections there, employment possibilities, language skill, and so on. The Russian Federation is the destination for the largest number of local labor migrants (70,4% of outmigrants are living and working in Russia). The massive migration flow from Sats’ire to Russia started around 1993–94 because villagers had an easy opportunity to go there. In the village, a local middleman organized groups of construction workers, taking them to the city of Irkutsk in Siberia. The middleman ended his activities in 2000 mainly because the Russian Federation instituted a stricter visa regime with Georgia. For Georgians, migrating to other former Soviet countries requires fewer financial resources and less legal hassle than going to Western countries. The only people who are able to migrate to Germany (8,3%) or the USA (2.1 %) are those who participate in au-pair, green card and other kinds of official programs.

Migration in Kvemo Alvani (Eastern Georgia)

The village Kvemo Alvani, with roughly 3,500 inhabitants, nestles among the foothills of the Caucasian mountain range in the province Kakheti. It is predominantly inhabited by ethnic Tushetians, traditional highlanders who were settled to Kvemo and Zemo Alvani by the Soviet authorities mainly in the 1950s. While Sats’ire is located in a region with the highest rate of outmigration in Georgia, the percentage of households with outmigrants is even higher in the village of Kvemo Alvani (26.2%). These high figures reflect the fact that seasonal migration has been a part of the Tushetian household economy for centuries, an explanatory factor we elaborate further in the conclusion.

In Kvemo Alvani, the majority of migrants are men (59.5%), but women play a far more significant role (40.5% vs. 25%) than they do in Sats’ire. This difference is directly related to the migration destination: Whereas the Russian Federation (27%) is considered to be a place for male labor migration, primarily for construction work (total 29,7%), women favor countries like Greece (37,8%) and Italy (10,8%) where they can work as maids and nannies (total 35,1%). Most of the migrants are between 21 and 40 years old (67,5%), but people older than 50 also leave their hometown (21,6%), usually driven by need and despair.

As in Sats’ire, most migrants from Kvemo Alvani were formerly either unemployed (29.7%) or worked in state institutions (24.3%). In contrast, however, at least 16.2% were involved in agriculture before migrating – a sector of no relevance in Sats’ire. In Kvemo Alvani, even fewer migrants have finished higher education (18.9%), which again points to the fact that no “brain drain” can be observed in the Georgian countryside.

A striking difference between the two cases is the time span of migration. Whereas most migrants from Sats’ire had been away for at least 2 years (79.2%), almost half of the Kvemo Albanian migrants (43.2%) left their village in the previous few months. A large portion of these migrants consists of male construction workers, who were mentioned as real and potential deportees from the Russian Federation in the introduction. Most of them take jobs in the Northern Caucasus, particularly Dagestan and Chechnya (18.9% of the 27% leaving for the entire Russian Federation). As one of our informants jokingly said: “At first, the Russians completely destroyed Chechnya. Now, they are pumping in an endless stream of money for its reconstruction”. As the wages are much higher in the Russian Federation, rebuilding Grozny is popular among young men from

Kvemo Alvani. And most of them find ways to return to Grozny even after their deportations.

Conclusion

Two migration patterns are clearly distinguishable in comparing our Eastern and Western Georgian field sites. The first pattern, observed in Kvemo Alvani, is seasonal in character and based on dynamic households, whose members act as semi-autonomous units. According to this pattern, certain household members temporarily go abroad. Mostly, these are men looking for work in a neighboring area, like the Northern Caucasus. This kind of migration pattern has a long history among Tushetians and is common among other mountain communities in the Alps and the Carpathians. It is embedded in a system of economic diversification aimed at the reduction of risks, which are always imminent in geographically precarious regions like the mountains.

The second kind of migration, identified in Sats'ire, is more permanent in character and based on entire households changing residence. Whereas in Kvemo Alvani, abandoned houses are a rare sight, they are quite common here. The large number of absent families marks the real difference between the two villages. The fact that so many families have recently left Sats'ire may be explained historically. Many of the families arrived here relatively late, in Soviet times, when the region was promoted and there were plenty of jobs. Their relatively short residence in Sats'ire probably did not allow for the creation of deep roots in the village.

Despite differences in the migration patterns, both communities are deeply affected by recent political and economic trends. First, the worsening political climate increasingly complicates migration to the most popular destination, the Russian Federation. Rumors concerning discrimination against Georgian labor migrants in Russia further enhance villagers' political alienation and feelings of insecurity about living and working there. Although Russia resumed issuing visas to Georgians at the beginning of March 2009 in a limited way, Georgian labor migrants will have great difficulty obtaining legal work and resident permits in the near future.

Second, the world economic crisis gravely influences migration to other popular destinations, particularly Spain. The Spanish economy has declined dramatically in the past months, and the formerly booming construction sector is particularly affected. As this is the sector where most Georgian labor migrants have been employed, many of them have left Spain and returned home. Although Italy and Greece are also struggling with the global crisis, migrant work in these countries is less at risk, as most work in the domestic sector. So far, the global financial crisis in the European Union has not seriously damaged the financial basis of most households, and domestic help is needed even in times of crisis. The coming months will show if the domestic sector can escape the large-scale series of bankruptcies and if the related labor migration remains more or less stable.

For the time being, at least, female labor migration to Greece and Italy seems to be the safest and most rewarding option. As for Georgian men, they either face increasing difficulties, decreasing status and illegality when migrating, or simply stay home. Consequently, the number of male household heads having to take care of their children and possibly parents without the support of their absent wives will increase considerably. Given the enduring popularity of the patriarchal image depicting the man as the breadwinner and the woman as raising the children, this new situation causes tremendous stress both within the family and in the village community.

Last, but not least, the drop of remittances caused by the decline of labor markets in the Russian Federation and the European Union will seriously harm the economic situation in Kvemo Alvani and Sats'ire, as in the whole of Georgia. Already, the total remittances sent to Georgia declined by 12.5% in January 2009 compared to the previous year. This is all the more problematic for the many families we met during our fieldwork, who rely on remittances as their main source of income. For them, remittances are the only efficient way to tackle the lack of social support from the state.

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