Azerbaijani Migrants in Russia

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Abstract

Russia has been the most popular emigration destination for Azerbaijanis since even before the end of the USSR. About 600,000 Azerbaijanis live in the Russian Federation where they are engaged mainly in the trade sector, especially in retail markets. Unlike more recent migrants, particularly those from Central Asia, they are now quite well integrated economically and tend to be a new middlemen minority.

Introduction

According to the International Organization for Migration, the Russian Federation has been a host country for more than 12 million migrants since 1989 and roughly 9% of the population in Russia are immigrants. Since 1991, Russia has indeed recorded a positive net migration rate with almost all the member states of the former Soviet Union (not taking into account the Baltic states).

Before 1991, populations originating from the South Caucasus and from Central Asia were among the least mobile of the USSR, both inside and outside their republic, but today this situation changed diametrically, and questions the post-imperial character of these migration flows. Russia is now the most popular emigration destination for Azerbaijani nationals, far more so than Western Europe or the Unites States, and everything indicates that this tendency will continue: indeed, while the European Union remains largely closed to all work-related legal immigration, Russia has left its borders, at least for the moment, relatively open.

In this regard, migrations in the post-Soviet area sometimes take on post-imperial aspects. Moreover, they are a remarkable example of the way social issues develop on their own since they are often excluded from official policy. Indeed, a lot of institutions were created since 1991 to maintain formal relations between the former ex-Soviet republics, and above all the Commonwealth of Independent States. But these institutions have been revealed as barely operational, and thus the migrations of previously Soviet citizens to Russia contribute to maintaining some links. From this point of view, Azerbaijani citizens benefit from a favourable regime as they have no obligation to obtain a visa to enter Russia. Although immigration from Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, and Uzbekistan to Russia is a relatively recent phenomenon that can be dated back to the beginning or mid-2000s, Azerbaijani immigration took root as of the late 1980s, early 1990s. It is based on a number of networks, some of which were set up before the breakdown of the USSR.

Statistics and Recent Historical Background

The number of Azerbaijanis in Russia, whether they possess Russian citizenship or not, is at an all-time high. Their number is subject to widespread speculations. On the one hand, the media and some organizations representing Azerbaijanis have a common tendency, though different motives, to overestimate them to a 2 million community. On the other hand, most Russian scholars as well as the Federal Migration Service (FMS) agree on a number ranging from 600,000 to one million persons of Azerbaijani background. This may be the most cautious estimation since, according to the last population census carried out in the Russian Federation in 2010, 603,070 people in Russia declared themselves "Azerbaijanis", which makes them one of the ten most numerous ethnic groups in the country. Among them, almost 360,000 are men. In addition to that, the World Bank's statistics for 2010 showed a bilateral migration matrix of almost 900,000 in favour of Russia. As far as Azerbaijani remittance inflows for 2013 are concerned, the World Bank's projections show that money transfered from foreign countries to Azerbaijan, should amount to $2.2 billion, sent mainly from Russia. As for migrant remittance outflows from Azerbaijan, they reached $2.1 billion in 2012. These figures are just a partial slice of reality but they tend to show that Azerbaijan generates emigration, but now attracts migrants, too.

Yet, the levelling tendency of statistics should not obliterate the fact that there are as many types of migration as immigrants themselves, whose trajectories and reasons for migrating are extremely diverse. The years 1989–1992 were a period of sharp increase in migration flows to Russia due to the conflicts in the post-Soviet area. Then, from 1994, the flows decreased dramatically. Migration flows at this time were characterized by their heterogeneity since there were refugees and IDPs, as well as transit migrants and economic immigrants. Indeed, migration factors were often intertwined. These qualitative and quantitative elements also concern migration flows from Azerbaijan to Russia and gave birth to immigrant communities that are nowadays labelled "diasporas." At the very beginning of the 1990s and contrary to immigrants from Central Asia who were predominantly ethnic Russians, migration flows from Azerbaijan were composed of the nationals who formed a majority in the former Soviet republic. In fact, Russians started leaving

the republics of the Southern Caucasus as early as the 1960s; therefore the number of Russian candidates for emigration was reduced. As a result of the Karabakh conflict, massive displacements took place and Azeri IDPs headed on from Karabakh and surrounding districts to Baku, before migrating to Russia, mainly due to dire economic conditions. If Moscow and St. Petersburg remain the most popular destinations for obvious reasons, the Ural region—particularly Yekaterinburg, Tyumen and Siberia in general, where the workforce deficit is blatant, have attracted and still do attract Azerbaijani immigrants in large numbers.

The Importance of the Service Sector for Employment

Whatever the circumstances that led them to leave their country of origin, most Azerbaijani immigrants in Russia, be they long-term or recent settlers, are involved in the trade sector, where they are believed to account for as much as 20% of the retail business. It only takes a walk through any Russian market, especially in Moscow, to notice that Azerbaijanis run many stalls. Trade and sales remain a means of economic integration for many recent and earlier South Caucasian migrants in a context marked by the rapid development of services upon entry into the market economy.

The networks which are prolonged or constituted as a result of post-Soviet migration appear significant in explaining, notably, the presence of particular groups of immigrants in certain economic sectors. They assist in the comprehension of, for instance, the ways of launching and of developing immigrant businesses, as well as entrepreneurial practicalities, for example ways of managing labour forces, relationships with marketed products and customer profiles. The presence of the so-called "Azerbaijani diaspora" in some "niche markets", such as the flower business, dates back to Soviet times.

In the Russian Federation, as in many other countries, immigrant entrepreneurship has found a way to blossom in the service sector. The networks acquire a particular significance for the immigrant communities and take on different configurations according to the contexts and the individuals concerned. They can be considered as a means of questioning the collective dynamics in migration, notably the permanent tension between adoption of the norms of the society of settlement and preservation of a given community, integration into Russia and conservation of a link with countries of origin by different vectors.

Restaurants are another attractive economic sector for Azerbaijanis in Russia, especially for small investors: small market snacks intended for Azerbaijani customers (but not only), restaurant complexes comprising several banquet rooms and hired singers, karaokes, or even restaurants that offer European and Japanese food along with traditional Azeri cuisine. This is nothing new since the service sector usually offers many job opportunities to immigrants, especially in global cities. Yet, this sector has experienced a real boom in Russia since service industries were almost nonexistent during the Soviet period, or were run by the state in a quite inefficient way.

Some Azerbaijanis who settled in Russia as of the 1980s started from scratch and made their way in Russia while opening a so-called "cooperative business" in the wake of the economic liberalisation launched by Mikhail Gorbachev. Then they climbed up the social ladder and became successful businessmen. There are even some well-known success stories: Araz Agalarov and Vagit Alekperov for instance, respectively lead Crocus International Holding and Lukoil, and Telman Ismaylov (who used to own Tcherkizovsky market before it was closed down in 2009) is also a well-known figure.

A New "Middlemen Minority"

Since the mid-2000s, a majority of immigrants from the former USSR in Russia come from Central Asia, first and foremost from Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan and Uzbekistan. These new immigrants form a kind of *lumpenproletariat* engaged in the so-called "3D jobs" (dirty, dangerous, and difficult), mainly in the construction business, but also in care and cleaning sectors. In this respect, Azerbaijani immigrants in Russia gained a certain status compared to their Central Asian counterparts. Nowadays, they act as a kind of new "middlemen-minority", that is to say a community well integrated economically and acting as a "go-between group" in society but that may become a scapegoat in a context of socio-economic rivalries with the local population. Thus all the more as Caucasians are first and foremost affected by racist behaviour, the motivations for which stem as much from the representations and the history of Caucasians as from stereotypes and prejudices anchored in the contemporary context.

In October 2013, there was a blatant example of how an isolated case involving a migrant can spark a violent anti-migrant campaign. Orhan Zeynalov, an Azerbaijani native suspected of killing a Russian man in Moscow on 10 October, was arrested by the police. At the very beginning, peaceful demonstrations of the local population of Biryulovo, the district where the murder occurred, took place. They demanded tighter control of the police in this area, and more severe immigration laws. On October 13 though, a crowd of thousands of anti-migrant protestors, some of them belonging to nationalist groups, stormed the local warehouse where a lot of migrants were employed, as they searched for the sus-

pected man, and clashed with police. Finally, the vegetable warehouse was closed by the authorities and the warehouse's directors, also originating from Azerbaijan, were arrested on the grounds of employing a (foreign) illegal labour force.

The retail business, especially retail markets, is considered particularly impenetrable and plagued with criminality, especially in Moscow. In the wake of the 2006–2007 anti-migrant campaign, one of the first measures taken by local authorities had been the closing down of Tcheriomushki retail market, where a lot of migrants from Georgia used to work. The widespread stereotypes in Russia against immigrants engaged in trade activities also has a lot to do with the Soviet period, when trade was associated with speculation, and therefore punishable by criminal law. And, Caucasian minorities, including Azerbaijanis who are known—rightly or wrongly—to "hold" several retail markets in Moscow, are perceived as particularly good at doing business. This has much more to do with the economic conditions than with some "ethnic abilities." When asked about their professional activities, a lot of Azerbaijanis engaged in the trade sector prefer using the expression "individual entrepreneurship" (in Russian *individual'noe predprinimatel'stvo)* which is a way to present a wide range of activities (from import-export trade to the ownership of a cheap eating place or very small retail businesses), and helps give their activities a semblance of prestige, if not of legality. Some of them even boast, saying "they have trade in their blood", and members of the Azerbaijani intelligentsia contend, in an hazardous attempt to give a historic explanation, that the presence of their countrymen in the trade sector is somehow related to the Silk Road period, whereas in fact, the Eastern Caucasus was not situated on the main route to China.

So, unlike migrants from Central Asia, the Azerbaijani "diaspora" in Russia seems more integrated, at least economically. Another interesting point is the presence of advocacy organizations which try to lobby in favor of Azerbaijanis. In Moscow, the two most active organizations are the All-Russia Azerbaijanis Congress (VAK) and the Federal National Cultural Autonomy of Azerbaijanis. For instance, when the new legislation on foreigners came into force in 2007, they tried to obtain a more liberal implementation for the citizens of Azerbaijan. In Zeynalov's case, they immediately offered their help to Russian authorities to arrest the suspected man when it was revealed that he came from Azerbaijan. However, their impact remains very dependant on the state of the relations between the Azerbaijani and Russian authorities.

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Sources and further readings

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