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RUSSIA'S ROLE AS THE PRIMARY MIGRATION HUB IN THE POST-SOVIET SPACE; MIGRATION TIES WITH SOUTH CAUCASUS COUNTRIES

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SUMMARY

The article discusses the role of Russia as a migration center in the post-Soviet space and its migration relations with the South Caucasus countries. It was also emphasized that after the collapse of the Soviet Union, the Russian Federation remained the main migration country for the South Caucasus countries, especially in terms of labor migration, and an analysis of statistical data was conducted. It should be noted that Russia's transformation into a major attractive center for foreign workers from post-Soviet countries has been directly linked to historical, socio-cultural, and economic reasons. However, recently, due to the tightening of migration legislation in Russia, the situation of migrants arriving from the South Caucasus has become significantly more difficult. Particularly after the amendments that entered into force on January 1, 2025, the permitted period of stay for foreign citizens on Russian territory was shortened, and all these changes also applied to citizens of Azerbaijan, Georgia, and Armenia arriving in Russia on a visa-free basis. The article also notes that starting from 2022, due to the Russia-Ukraine war, the migration of citizens out of Russia to other countries began, and this process has taken on a continuous character.

Keywords: *post-Soviet space, South Caucasus, Russian Federation, migration flows, demographic situation, labor migrants.*

INTRODUCTION

A general analysis of the period from the 1920s of the 20th century until the collapse of the USSR shows that migration processes between Russia and other republics included in the Soviet Union were intensive in character. In those years, migration flows were mainly directed toward rapidly developing regions and new production centers. Furthermore, in order to create a social base in the national republics, the migration of the Russian population continued in the 1950s–1960s to Kazakhstan and other Central Asian republics, as well as to the South Caucasus, alongside Latvia, Estonia, Lithuania, and Moldova. In the 1970s–1980s, migration flows from the Russian Federation decreased to a certain extent. One of the main reasons for this decrease was the emergence of a labor force shortage within Russia itself, which was related to changes in the age structure of the population, a drop in the birth rate, and a decrease in the specific weight of young people [6, p. 11].

As a result of the collapse of the USSR and the changes that occurred at the end of the last century, the transformation of migration trends caused the emergence of new migration flows both within Russia and between the newly independent states and distant foreign countries. From the early 1990s onward, migration performed a very crucial demographic function in terms of stabilizing the population size throughout Russia, playing an important role in preventing population decline caused by the negative natural growth formed in those years. Russia considered the use of immigration acceptable to increase its labor resources [12, p. 90].

Following the collapse of the USSR, changes occurred in Russia's migration exchange with former allied republics. Between 1989 and 1995, the positive migration balance between Russia and the other republics of the union in favor of Russia increased 3.7 times. This increase occurred mainly due to a sharp decrease in the outflow of population from Russia [5, p. 73]. As Vladimir Ionsev and Irina Ivakhnyuk noted in their research report titled "Integration Models of Migrants in Modern Russia," over the thirty-plus years since the dissolution of the Soviet Union, the Russian Federation has turned into the largest migrant-receiving country in the post-Soviet space [10, p. 1-2]. Among the important reasons why Russia has been leading in migration from the South Caucasus republics among post-Soviet countries were historically formed political and economic ties. Russians living in these countries also headed

toward Russia, although Russia was interested in keeping them in other countries and turning them into a social base for the future implementation of Russia's policies. According to the 1989 census, the number of Russians living in Armenia was 51.5 thousand, whereas in 2011 their number constituted 11.9 thousand (0.39% of the country's population) [21]. In Georgia, the number of Russians was 341.2 thousand in 1989, but by 2011 their number dropped to 110 thousand (0.5% of the country's population) [4]. The number of Russians living in Azerbaijan in 1989 was 392.3 thousand; according to the 2009 census, their number was 119,306, and according to the subsequent census conducted in 2019, it was 71,259 [1]. After the collapse of the Soviet Union, the Russian Federation has remained the primary migration country for the South Caucasus countries, particularly in terms of labor migration. True, in this sphere, the South Caucasus republics lagged behind Kazakhstan and other Central Asian countries in terms of the number of migrants going to Russia. Thus, according to analyses, Kazakhstan has been the donor country that made the largest contribution to migration growth in the Russian Federation after the collapse of the USSR, despite the fact that from the beginning of the 21st century, the government of this country, concerned about the loss of qualified population, took measures to curb this flow. Nevertheless, migrants coming from Central Asian countries provided two-thirds of the net migration growth to the Russian Federation [6, p. 11-12].

From the 1990s of the 20th century until 2022, when the Russia-Ukraine war began, Russia remained one of the main centers of labor migration. This flow not only overcame temporary labor shortages amid progressively decreasing labor resources, but also turned into an increasingly significant public phenomenon for the Russian Federation with socio-economic, demographic, socio-cultural, and geopolitical consequences. For example, despite the temporary intention of staying in Russia, labor migrants obtained temporary residence permits and permanent residence permits, increased the population size, contributed to birth and death rates, and helped develop certain spheres of the economy and regions by producing approximately one-tenth of the country's GDP, even though migration could in some cases also turn into a source of unemployment, crime, and social tension [17, p. 66].

MAIN TEXT

At the beginning of the 21st century, as everywhere else in the world, migration processes began to be viewed in the Russian Federation as an element of national and public security. This was by no means accidental. According to UN-level sources, 20 states dominated the world based on the number of migrants. Russia was in 2nd place in the world at that time. The United States was in 1st place with 38 million migrants, Russia was in 2nd place with 12 million migrants, and Germany was in 3rd place with 10 million migrants [13, p.15].

In 2001, the resolution of migration problems was entrusted to the Ministry of Internal Affairs of the Russian Federation. Realizing that the citizenship and legal provisions adopted over many years had led to the formation of an inefficient bureaucratic apparatus, the Russian authorities made many changes. Starting precisely from this period, under conditions of an ongoing demographic crisis, the cessation of the influx of migrants arriving for permanent residence began to be evaluated as a threat to national security. The Security Council of the Russian Federation announced the necessity of revising existing legislation in March 2005. On January 1, 2007, the program for the voluntary return of former compatriots to Russia started [6, p. 10-11].

After the disintegration of the USSR, the main mass of migrants from all three countries of the South Caucasus (Armenia, Azerbaijan, Georgia) consisted of periodically and temporarily working men, who mainly headed toward the Russian Federation. The fact that the majority of migrants from the South Caucasus headed specifically to Russia was directly linked to several factors. The first of these factors was the historical factor. Throughout the 19th century, the South Caucasus was governed as a colony by Tsarist Russia, and after the 1920s of the 20th century, the Caucasus republics became part of the USSR. The economic space formed over 70 years continued to live in economic consciousness even after the restoration of independence. For migrants from the South Caucasus, the legal and economic system of the Russian Federation was not alien, and understanding it did not cause difficulties. Cultural and linguistic proximities also played a significant role in making migration processes Russia-centric. During the Soviet period, the hegemonistic position of the Russian language in the union led to the formation of a bilingual environment in the South Caucasus republics as well, and the majority of the population spoke Russian alongside their native language. This factor also played a significant role in migrants heading primarily to Russia after the 1990s

of the 20th century. One of the most important issues was related to the absence of a visa regime between the Russian Federation and the South Caucasus republics [24, p. 7].

In 1998, there were 1.2 million persons on the territory of the Russian Federation who had received refugee and forced migrant status. Official agency data noted that in 1992-1997, every 5th refugee or forced migrant in the Russian Federation was a citizen of CIS and Baltic countries [11, p. 96]. In 2016, the Russian Federation was the second country in the world receiving the most migrants after the USA and the Federal Republic of Germany. In that year, there were 11.5 million migrants in the Russian Federation [8, p. 92-93].

The high share of the population going from the South Caucasus to Russia in the late 1980s and early 1990s within the composition of migrants coming to this country was linked to conflicts, the economic situation, as well as the issue of repatriation. Thus, a large part of Russians who were moved to allied republics by various means during the Soviet period began to return to Russia on the eve of the collapse of the USSR. An analysis of statistics concerning the ethnic composition of migrants coming to Russia from former USSR republics in 1989–2000 clearly shows this. During that period, the shares of Russians and representatives of titular nationalities in migration flows directed from the South Caucasus republics to Russia changed in different directions over time. In 1989, 22% of migrants coming to Russia from Azerbaijan were Russians, and 29% were Azerbaijanis. While the share of Russians rose to 45% in 1991, the share of Azerbaijanis dropped to 25%. In 1992, the specific weight of Russians reached 54%. At that time, the share of Azerbaijanis had decreased to 14%. However, starting from 1993, this trend changed: the share of Russians dropped to 45%, in 1995 to 38%, in 1997 to 28%, in 1999 to 18%, and in 2000 to 15%. Contrary to this, the share of Azerbaijanis began to increase continuously starting from 1993, constituting 35% in 1995, 49% in 1997, 57% in 1999, and 60% in 2000. This dynamics shows that from the second half of the 1990s onward, ethnic Azerbaijanis began to predominate in migration to Russia. When analyzing indicators for Georgia, it becomes clear that in 1989, 33% of migrants coming to Russia were Russian, and only 3% were Georgian. In 1991–1992, the share of Russians rose to 49% and 57% respectively, while the share of Georgians remained at the 9% and 7% levels. In 1993, the share of Russians was 50%, and the share of Georgians was 11%. After 1995, the specific weight of Russians rapidly decreased to 30%, in 1997 to 26%, in 1999 to 19%, and in 2000 to 16%. During the same period, the share of the Georgian ethnos increased conversely, constituting 21% in 1995, 26% in 1997, 20% in 1999, and 21% in 2000 [5, p. 74]. The dynamics for Armenia was quite different. In 1989, 23% of migrants coming to Russia were Russians, and 57% were Armenians. Although the share of Russians rose to 36% in 1991, the share of Armenians dropped to 49%. In 1992, Russians made up 38%, and Armenians 47%. Starting from 1993, the specific weight of Russians sharply decreased to 22%, in 1995 to 8%, in 1997 to 7%, and in 1999 and 2000 to only 5%. On the contrary, the share of Armenians rose rapidly, constituting 66% in 1993, 84% in 1995, 84% in 1997, 82% in 1999, and 81% in 2000 [5, p. 75].

After the disintegration of the USSR, the Russian diaspora turned into one of the largest diasporas in the world. Thus, approximately 40 million people who considered Russia their historical homeland remained in the former Soviet republics, which are called the "near abroad" in the Russian Federation. Of them, 25 million were ethnic Russians, 11 million were Russian-speaking non-Russians, and 1.5 million were representatives of various peoples living mainly in Russia. By the beginning of 2010, more than 12 million of those people (including 7.5 million Russians) had returned to Russia. In other words, the Russian diaspora in former union republics encompassed approximately 28 million people. In "distant foreign" countries, the number of the Russian diaspora exceeded 22 million, and two-thirds of it live in the USA and Canada [10, p. 8].

Following the restoration of state independence, Russia has always been the main destination country in the northern direction for Azerbaijani migrants [24, p. 133]. As a result of the signing of the Treaty on "Friendship, Cooperation and Mutual Security" signed in Moscow in 1997 between the Republic of Azerbaijan and the Russian Federation, the Russia-Azerbaijan border was reopened and a visa-free regime was established, which caused an increase in the dynamics of labor migration [2, s. 5]. Nevertheless, it should be noted that although Russia remained the primary receiving country for labor migrants from Azerbaijan at the beginning of the 21st century, there were also significant flows to Ukraine, Kazakhstan, and other CIS countries [24, p. 88]. According to data from the Federal Migration Service of Russia, the number of Azerbaijani citizens

with temporary work permits increased from 28,319 in 2006 to 76,283 in 2008, and in 2010 this figure dropped to 40,349. This constituted approximately 3% of all foreign workers in Russia [24, p. 133].

Historically, the Russian Federation has been the main destination country for Georgian migrants in the post-independence period. The reason for this was the visa-free regime existing until 2000, historical-economic ties, geographical-cultural proximity, and knowledge of the Russian language. However, the situation changed with the introduction of a visa regime in 2000 and the closure of state borders as a result of the 2008 Russia-Georgia war. Processes taking place during that period caused the Russian Federation to lose its status as the main destination for Georgian migrants, and Georgian migrants began heading more toward European countries. Processes occurring in 2007-2008 created difficulties in migration to Russia not only for Georgian-origin citizens of Georgia, but even for Armenians who had citizenship in Georgia and were constantly under Russia's influence. Seeing this, the Armenians of Georgia renounced Georgian citizenship and accepted Russian or Armenian citizenship, because Georgian legislation at those years did not accept dual citizenship [3, p. 67].

It should be noted that since the 1990s of the 20th century, migration policy in the Russian Federation has passed through various stages in its development. According to Russian authors, under the created conditions, the Russian Federation pursues an active policy toward ensuring the rights and freedoms of migrants, and this finds its reflection in concrete legislative acts and practical work [13, p.35]. In 2018, the "Concept of State Migration Policy of the Russian Federation for 2019-2025" was adopted in the Russian Federation [18].

Finally, the resulting situation led relevant structures of the Russian government, especially the country's Ministry of Internal Affairs, to begin working on a new migration law that should replace the existing migration legislation in the country (the laws "On Migration Registration of Foreign Citizens and Stateless Persons," "On the Procedure for Exiting and Entering Russia," and "On the Legal Status of Foreign Citizens in Russia"). In 2017-2019, the Russian Federation occupied a leading place according to the number of accepted migrants. Statistics from that period show this precisely. Thus, 4.9 million people entered the territory of the Russian Federation for work purposes in 2017 [15]; 5.1 million people in 2018 [16]; and 4.1 million people in 2019 [19]; in subsequent years this process also continued with certain increases, but gradually weakened as a result of the Russia-Ukraine war.

In addition, after the war began, a new migration wave emerged from Russia. According to various sources, more than 300 thousand people have left Russia since the war began for different reasons, ranging from political persecution to attempts to evade sanctions [22]. Most of them went to neighboring states of the Eastern Europe and Central Asia region: Georgia, Armenia, Azerbaijan, Central Asian countries, as well as countries like Turkey where visas are not required. T. Darieva came to the conclusion through her research that the arrival of hundreds of thousands of Russian citizens after the start of Russia's intervention in Ukraine was greeted differently by the population of the South Caucasus countries. Touching upon the issue of attitude toward Russian migrants mainly in Georgia and Armenia, the author indicates that this attitude was mostly negative in Georgia and relatively more positive in Armenia [20]. Our research shows that after the start of the war, Russian migrants headed to Azerbaijan to a lesser extent compared to other South Caucasus republics. Migration to Azerbaijan, which keeps its borders closed under the pretext of COVID-19 and other security reasons, and where the entry route for foreign citizens is mainly air transport, is considered quite expensive. From this perspective, a large part of the migrants heading to Azerbaijan are considered representatives of more secure strata, and their number is not noticeably large. Along with this, migrants coming from Russia do not stand out so sharply in the multicultural environment existing in Azerbaijan, and this does not cause the formation of a special negative or special positive attitude toward them.

Taking into account what happened between Russia and Georgia in 2008, feelings of uncertainty and distrust toward Russia and new migrants manifested themselves more prominently among Georgians [23, p. 68]. One of the main points frightening Georgians is the probability that Russia could subsequently use the influx of its citizens here as a pretext. It is known that Russia, which granted citizenship to persons living on the territory of the self-proclaimed South Ossetia in Georgia's Tskhinvali region until 2008, later pointed precisely to the violation of the rights of its own citizens as a pretext to attack this country, entering its military units onto Georgia's territory under the guise of protecting them. From this perspective, many Georgians view migrants with Russian passports as a symbol of an occupying and colonialist

state, paying attention to the political rather than individual motives of their emigration [20].

Prior to the Russia-Ukraine war and the peak of tensions between Russia and European states, Russia's approach to migration processes differed from Europe. While migration processes further deepened the crisis in Europe, for Russia it has been the principal mechanism for partially meeting the demand for cheap labor. Migrants created an additional stimulus for the socio-economic development of the country. If we turn to UN statistics, the total number of international migrants in the world was 154 million people in 1990, 175 million people in 2000, and 232 million people in 2013, with this indicator constituting 116 million people for Russia, demonstrating a positive balance. From this perspective, it is not accidental that researchers analyzing migration processes in the Russian Federation during that period characterized migration as an indicator of civilization's rise [9, p.7-8]. Meanwhile, the tightening of migration legislation in Russia complicates the situation of migrants heading to this country from the South Caucasus countries. After the amendments that entered into force on January 1, 2025, the period of stay of foreign citizens on Russian territory has been shortened. This also applies to persons arriving in Russia on a visa-free basis, including citizens of Azerbaijan, Georgia, and Armenia. The period of stay has been reduced from 180 days to a maximum of 90 days for each calendar year [25]. At the regional level (for example, in the Moscow region starting from January 2025), labor migrants have been banned from getting jobs in certain fields (public catering, healthcare, education, and social services). Employers' responsibility for illegal hiring is being increased, and the participation of companies violating the rules in public procurement is restricted [10, p. 5].

According to the deportation regime that entered into force on February 5, 2025, a "Register of Controlled Persons" was created in the Russian Federation. The names of foreign citizens who have violated migration legislation are entered into this register. According to preliminary data, the number of persons from Armenia alone whose names were entered in 2025 was 30–40 thousand [25]. Based on data published by the Main Directorate for Migration Issues of the Ministry of Internal Affairs of the Russian Federation, 476 Armenian citizens were expelled from the RF in 2020-2024. This figure was 20 people in 2020, 217 in 2021, 47 in 2022, 100 in 2023, and 92 in 2024. Along with this, during those years, entry into Russia was banned for 88,375 Armenian citizens. Based on statistical data, the number of Armenian citizens facing such a ban was 18,078 in 2020, 19,637 in 2021, 18,370 in 2022, 15,936 in 2023, and 16,354 in 2024 [25].

The worsening of the economic and social situation in Russia has also complicated the situation for Azerbaijani migrants. According to a study, this is also clearly manifested in the decrease in the volume of financial remittances transferred from the Russian Federation to the Republic of Azerbaijan in recent years [26]. On October 15, 2025, President Vladimir Putin approved the new "Concept of State Migration Policy of the Russian Federation" for 2026–2030. This document declares as its main goal ensuring a balance between the economy's demand for labor resources, the protection of national security, and social stability. The concept envisions the creation of conditions for the legal residence of migrants, their integration into society, and the reduction of the scale of illegal migration [14]. By the beginning of 2026, the number of migrants in Russia decreased from 6.3 million to 5.7 million. During 2025, 15.6 million entries into the country were recorded, which is 1 million fewer compared to 2024 [7].

CONCLUSION

In conclusion, we can note that based on analyses, Russia has historically been the largest migration center in the post-Soviet space. Economic, cultural-linguistic, and historical ties formed during the Soviet period, a visa-free regime, and a common legal space caused South Caucasus migrants to head primarily toward Russia in the post-Soviet period. However, in recent years, the tightening of Russia's migration policy, the COVID-19 pandemic, and the ongoing Russia-Ukraine war since 2022 have exerted a serious impact on migration processes, leading both to a decrease in the flow of migrants going from the South Caucasus to Russia and to the emergence of a new migration wave in the opposite direction—from Russia to the South Caucasus countries. In December 2025, Prime Minister Mikhail Mishustin approved a concrete action plan for 2026–2030. According to that plan, citizens arriving from visa-free CIS countries (except Belarus) must register in advance via a mobile application, and in perspective, the use of migration cards should be completely abolished. Although Russia's new migration concept (2026-2030) tries to create a balance between economic demand and security, strict legislative changes, the shortening of stay periods, and the imple-

mentation of a deportation regime continue to make migration from the region even more difficult.

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РОЛЬ РОССИИ КАК ГЛАВНОГО МИГРАЦИОННОГО ЦЕНТРА НА ПОСТСОВЕТСКОМ ПРОСТРАНСТВЕ, МИГРАЦИОННЫЕ СВЯЗИ СО СТРАНАМИ ЮЖНОГО КАВКАЗА

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Диссертант кафедры международных отношений Бакинского Государственного Университета, преподаватель Музыкального Колледжа при Азербайджанской Национальной Консерватории

РЕЗЮМЕ

В статье рассматривается роль России как миграционного центра на постсоветском пространстве и ее миграционные связи со странами Южного Кавказа. Также было подчеркнуто, что после распада Советского Союза Российская Федерация оставалась основной страной миграции для стран Южного Кавказа, особенно в плане трудовой миграции, и был проведен анализ статистических данных. Следует учитывать, что превращение России в крупный центр притяжения для иностранных работников из стран постсоветского пространства было непосредственно связано с историческими, социально-культурными и экономическими причинами. Однако в последнее время из-за ужесточения миграционного законодательства в России положение прибывающих сюда мигрантов из Южного Кавказа значительно усложнилось. В частности, после изменений, вступивших в силу с 1 января 2025 года, сроки пребывания иностранных граждан на территории России были сокращены, и все это распространилось также на граждан Азербайджана, Грузии и Армении, прибывающих в Россию на безвизовой основе. В статье также отмечается, что начиная с 2022 года из-за российско-украинской войны началась миграция граждан из самой России в другие страны, и этот процесс принял устойчивый характер.

Ключевые слова: *постсоветское пространство, Южный Кавказ, Российская Федерация, миграционные потоки, демографическая ситуация, трудовые мигранты.*

POSTSOVET MƏKANINDA RUSIYANIN ƏSAS MIQRASIYA MƏRKƏZI KIMI ROLU, CƏNUBI QAFQAZ ÖLKƏLƏRI ILƏ MIQRASIYA ƏLAQƏLƏRI

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XÜLASƏ

Məqalədə Rusiyanın postsovet məkanında miqrasiya mərkəzi kimi rolundan və Cənubi Qafqaz ölkələri ilə miqrasiya əlaqələrindən bəhs olunur. Eləcə də, Sovet İttifaqının dağılmasından sonra Rusiya Federasiyasının Cənubi Qafqaz ölkələri üçün xüsusən əmək miqrasiyası baxımından əsas miqrasiya ölkəsi olaraq qalması vurğulanmış, statistik məlumatların təhlili aparılmışdır. Nəzərə alınmalıdır ki, Rusiyanın postsovet məkanı ölkələrindən olan xarici işçilər üçün böyük cəlbedici mərkəzə çevrilməsi tarixi, sosial-mədəni və iqtisadi səbəblərlə birbaşa bağlı olmuşdur. Lakin son zamanlar Rusiyada miqrasiya qanunvericiliyinin sərtləşməsinə görə Cənubi Qafqazdan buraya gələn miqrantların vəziyyəti xeyli çətinləşmiş, xüsusilə 2025-ci il yanvarın 1-dən qüv-

vəyə minmiş dəyişikliklərdən sonra xarici vətəndaşların Rusiya ərazisində qalma müddəti qısaldılnmış və bütün bunlar vizasız əsasla Rusiyaya gələn Azərbaycan, Gürcüstan və Ermənistan vətəndaşlarına da şamil olunmuşdur. Məqalədə həmçinin 2022-ci ildən etibarən Rusiya- Ukrayna müharibəsinə görə Rusiyadan vətəndaşların başqa ölkələrə miqrasiya etməsinin başlanması və bu prosesin davamlı hal alması qeyd edilmişdir.

Açar sözlər: *Postsovet məkanı, Cənubi Qafqaz, Rusiya Federasiyası, miqrasiya axınları, demoqrafik situasiya, əməkçi miqrantlar.*

Rəyçi: Siyasi elmlər üzrə fəlsəfə doktoru, dosent Nərgiz Nağıyeva

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