

“TOO RUSSIAN FOR KAZAKHSTAN, TOO KAZAKH FOR RUSSIA”: LOOKING AT ETHNIC RUSSIAN STUDENT MIGRATION

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Kazakhstan is central to migration in Eurasia. The state attracts migrants from other Central Asian countries: one-third of its immigrants come from Kyrgyzstan, Uzbekistan, and Tajikistan. Similarly, Kazakhstan’s citizens migrate to other countries¹ in search of jobs and educational opportunities. One attractive destination is Russia, because of its geographic proximity, visa-free travel, return migration, and social and economic development. The purposes of migration from Kazakhstan to Russia mostly include work, education, and family reunification. There is debate over the effects of this migration: some scholars find the influence to be negative, indicating that migrant expectations are frequently not met in the new place,² while others show that some migrants considerably benefit from the move.³



One area that is heavily understudied is the educational migration of ethnic Russian Kazakhstanis to Russia. At the beginning of the 2015–2016 academic year, more than 237,000 foreign students were studying in Russia, as reported by the Higher School of Economics (HSE).⁴ Of these, 79% (or 188,130 students) were from CIS countries and 28% (about 68,000) were from Kazakhstan, meaning that every fourth foreign student in Russia is from Kazakhstan. Although it is unknown how many of these students are ethnic Russians, anecdotal evidence confirms that ethnic Russians represent an important part of Kazakhstani students studying in Russia. Why do ethnic Russian students leave Kazakhstan to study in Russia and how do they fare once they arrive?

In the research for this article, 32 people were surveyed and five in-depth interviews were conducted with ethnic Russian students from Kazakhstan who migrated to Russia to attend university. In the interview sessions, respondents discussed reasons for migrating and how their expectations have or have not been met while in Russia. These interviews investigated if and how families influenced their decision and whether ethnic, social, and political backgrounds were factors. Respondents were also asked questions about their socialization in their new location in Russia, providing information to assess whether their integration process was more positive than for older adult migrants.

I have identified at least three potential factors for the educational migration of ethnic Russian Kazakhstanis: Kazakhization and de-Russification in Kazakhstan, expectations about employment opportunities, and family networks.

Kazakhization and De-Russification

One of the most influential factors behind ethnic Russians leaving Kazakhstan is the increased ethno-nationalization of Kazakhstan and the potential social exclusion of the ethnic Russian population. The question of national identity building in post-Soviet states is tightly connected to ideology, history, language, and religion.⁵ For the Kazakhstani government, the revival of the Kazakh language has been crucial to reestablishing the Kazakh national identity. Although Russian is still an official language, and widely used in the country's everyday life, knowing the Kazakh

¹ Sergey Ryazantsev, "Kazakhstan Today: Migration – Trends and Regulation Approaches," *Central Asia and the Caucasus* 17, no. 2 (2016): 70–79.

² Natal'ia Kosmarskaia, "Russkie v Tsentral'noi Azii: bol'noi vopros? Naskol'ko i dlia kogo? (na primere situatsii v Kirgizskoi Respublike)," *Tsentral'naia Azia i Kavkaz*, no. 5 (1999): 31–40.

³ Olga Lazareva, "Russian Migrants to Russia: Assimilation and Local Labor Market Effects," *IZA Journal of Migration* 4, no. 20 (2015): 1–25, <https://doi.org/10.1186/s40176-015-0044-9>

⁴ Olesyi Kovaleva, "Akademicheskaia mobil'nost' inostrannykh studentov v Rosii: Stimuly i bar'ery," in *Megasotsiologiia Novye vozmozhnosti razvitiia rossiiskogo obshchestva v usloviakh geopoliticheskikh izmenenii*, ed. Natal'ia Orekhovskaia, Liudmila Brushkova, and Svetlana Iushkova (collection of conference papers, Moscow, Russia, October 2018).

⁵ Akbota Yergaliyeva, "Kazakhstan's Language Reform," *Critique: A Worldwide Student Journal of Politics* (2018): 22–44, <https://about.illinoisstate.edu/critique/http-about-illinoisstate-edu-critique-https-about-illinoisstate-edu-critique-archives-fall-2019-fall-2019/spring-2018/>

language has become a de facto social requirement. There is Kazakh language testing in universities (for all students regardless of their native languages) and an ongoing debate on whether to require Kazakh language proficiency in the workplace.⁶

This Kazakhization pressure has been an additional factor for the emigration of Slavic groups, including Russians.⁷ During the extended interviews, all respondents expressed certain discomfort with the “Kazakh language revival” policies, citing the importance of knowing the Kazakh language to get job promotions and Kazakh language testing in universities. For instance, some respondents found it difficult to communicate with Kazakh-speaking people in everyday interactions. One student recalled,

There was one case when we went out of our town (Almaty). We drove a little further from the city to an urban type settlement. So, I went to the store to get a bottle of water, and I walked in and said, “Hello, can I have a bottle of water, please,” in a very friendly way. To this, in response, I received, “Kazaksha aitshy” (“Speak Kazakh to me”). Well, I thought, “Okay, it happens,” and asked the same thing in Kazakh. It was only surprising because the person is Russian speaking. I know it because the girl who was sitting next to her spoke Russian to her while I was leaving.⁸ (Interview 1, female student, Saint Petersburg)

This experience, however, seems specific to rural areas. All respondents graduated from city schools with Russian as a teaching language. They said they felt welcomed by their teachers and never felt pressured to speak Kazakh, even in their Kazakh language classes. One of the respondents said that her Kazakh language teacher was more tolerant in terms of grading since she did not expect ethnic Russian students and students from Russian-language schools to know Kazakh well. However, outside of that welcoming educational framework, students describe feelings of social discomfort and alienation:

Still, the percentage of the population is changing. Every year you see that the situation is getting worse for the Russians [in Kazakhstan]. If I’d differentiate between when I was a child and now, then, currently, there are much fewer Russians in the country. Personally, this makes me uncomfortable. Over the past four years, I just noticed that I am simply more comfortable with *svoi* (my people).⁹ (Interview 5, male student, Saint Petersburg)

Another student described a feeling of being out of place:

One of my friends told me once that I was too Russian for Kazakhstan and too Kazakh for Russia. And I get it so much. Especially the “too Russian for Kazakhstan” part. For instance, my sister could get her promotion at work only when she

⁶ William Fierman, “Language and Education in Post-Soviet Kazakhstan: Kazakh-Medium Instruction in Urban Schools,” *The Russian Review* 65, no. 1 (2006): 98–116, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/3664037>

⁷ Narek Mkrtychyan, “New Language Policy of Kazakhstan: A Project of Kazakhization?” *Contemporary Eurasia* 6, no. 1 (2017): 106–119.

⁸ Student #1, interview by author, July 10, 2021.

⁹ Student #5, interview by author, July 16, 2021.

learned Kazakh. So maybe if I learn Kazakh, I will become Kazakh enough for Kazakhstan?¹⁰ (Interview 3, female student, Moscow)

Labor Market Expectations

Another reason why students might leave Kazakhstan is the lack of employment opportunities for non-Kazakhs. While citizens of all ethnicities have equal legal rights, including employment rights, Kazakhstan, like other Central Asian states, has been experiencing an ethnicization of the job market since the 1990s.¹¹ Although there is not substantial research about the ethnic exclusion of Russians from certain employment areas, there are telling signs. For instance, in 1991 about 80% of government officials were ethnically Kazakh.¹² Today, in governmental branches such as the ministries of justice, finance, and foreign affairs, non-Kazakh officials constitute no more than 10% of all employees.¹³ For instance in 2015, Kazakhs accounted for 93.4% of the total number of *akims* (the heads of local government) while non-Kazakhs accounted for 6.6%.¹⁴

The Kazakhization of the job market explains why there is increased desire for ethnic Russians to move to a country perceived as more favorable to them. However, Kazakhstan is also a country where career success is correlated with one's ability to enter patronage networks.¹⁵ Some ethnic Russians may follow this algorithm and succeed there. On the other hand, they are the exception rather than the rule. Most ethnic Russians who experience fear of not fitting into the patronage system may decide to leave the country. This may also be a reason why young people leave Kazakhstan to attend university, hoping that Russia will offer better employment opportunities after graduation. This was supported by respondents in the following extended interviews:

I never had a global idea to leave Kazakhstan because life here was fine in general. But when it came to choosing a profession at high school, I began to understand that the only thing I want to do is economics. But the problem, from my point of view, was that in Kazakhstan I have not seen a best fit university. In Russia, I chose between St. Petersburg State University, Moscow State University, and HSE. I thought that no matter what university, the main thing is that education is worth it. Economics is a huge sphere. At some point, I realized that in Kazakhstan, no matter how rude it may sound, there is no such economics sphere in which you would want to work. In Russia at least the sphere itself is wider. In Kazakhstan

¹⁰ Student #3, interview by author, July 15, 2021.

¹¹ Sébastien Peyrouse, "Nationhood and the Minority Question in Central Asia: The Russians in Kazakhstan," *Europe-Asia Studies* 59, no. 3 (2007): 481–501, <https://doi.org/10.1080/09668130701239930>

¹² Martha Brill Olcott, "Post-Soviet Kazakhstan: The Demographics of Ethnic Politics," *Problems of Post-Communism* 42, no. 2 (1995): 24–28, <https://doi.org/10.1080/10758216.1995.11655595>

¹³ Marlène Laurelle and Sébastien Peyrouse, *Les Russes du Kazakhstan: Identités nationales et nouveaux États dans l'espace post-soviétique* (Paris: Maisonneuve & Larose, Institut Français d'Études sur l'Asie Centrale, 2004).

¹⁴ Roman Stakanov, "The Role of Regional Migration Policy in the Development of Migration Processes," *Economics, Management and Sustainability* 3, no. 1 (2018): 70–78, <https://doi.org/10.14254/jems.2018.3-1.7>

¹⁵ Zharmukhamed Zardykhan, "Russians in Kazakhstan and Demographic Change: Imperial Legacy and the Kazakh Way of Nation Building," *Asian Ethnicity* 5, no. 1 (2004): 61–79, <https://doi.org/10.1080/1463136032000168907>

there is simply one existing stock exchange, and it is so undeveloped that none of the economists from Kazakhstan with whom I spoke even know what it is. I tried to research it this year, but I couldn't even find proper valuations.¹⁶ (Interview 3, female student, Moscow)

I have already obtained the citizenship of the Russian Federation and there is no turning back. I will explain why I stayed in the Russian Federation after completing my bachelor's degree. Here I found a job by my university major in a large oil and gas company thanks to the university and my efforts during my studies. After the 3rd year, I wanted to undergo industrial practice and I was not taken anywhere in Kazakhstan. I sent about ten of my resumes to almost every company in the oil and gas sector in Kazakhstan and no one even answered me, although my university is the top one in the Russian Federation in the oil and gas business. Therefore, I plan to do a master's degree in Russia and work there.¹⁷ (Interview 4, male student, Tomsk)

Family Networks

Finally, another factor behind rampant migration is the presence of family networks in the destination country.¹⁸ The existence of family networks provides security, cultural familiarity, and job prospects for a newly arrived migrant. For this reason, ethnic Russians from Central Asia are most likely to move to cities where they have relatives. Unfortunately, while almost all migration studies accentuate variation in factors leading to migration, there is no substantial literature on how migrants respond to economic challenges and shocks at a destination country. Moreover, the research done on migrant adaptation is exclusively about working-age adults and does not separate or sometimes even include youth or student migrants. In this study, all five respondents of extended interviews said that the presence of family networks in Russia made it easier for them to move there because it mitigated emotional and financial stress. Moreover, all respondents mentioned that they plan to obtain Russian citizenship and having relatives in Russia makes the process easier.

Effects of Migration from Kazakhstan

The challenges ethnic Russian migrants from Kazakhstan face varies depending on their final destination, age group, economic and social circumstances, gender, and financial security. When evaluating migration, there are two expected outcomes: satisfactory or unsatisfactory. Although these are oversimplified markers, they are to be discussed further in the following section.

¹⁶ Student #3, interview by author, July 15, 2021.

¹⁷ Student #4, interview by author, July 16, 2021.

¹⁸ Charles Becker, Erbolat Musabek, Ai-Gul Seitenova, and Dina Urzhumova, "The Migration Response to Economic Shock: Lessons from Kazakhstan," *Journal of Comparative Economics* 33, no. 1 (2005): 107–132, <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jce.2004.12.003>

One of the ways in which migration affects migrants is it causes disappointment when expectations about their lives in the new place are not met. Natalya Kosmarskaya, senior researcher at the Russian Academy of Sciences, found that ethnic migrants may face difficulties in their new environment. Local people refuse to recognize them as their co-ethnics (*svoi*) and see them as “newcomers” (*priezzhie*) as “[t]hey identify them as representatives of the titular nation of their home country—in our case, as Kazakhs—, thereby denying the assumption of any ethnocultural affinity.”¹⁹ While ethnic Russian migrants who move to Russia expect migration to provide them with social inclusion and political safety, they are sometimes met by yet another kind of social exclusion.

Unlike integration of adult migrants in Russia, adaptation of ethnic-Russian youth migrants is understudied. The results of this study may imply that the integration of young ethnic-Russians is easier than that of adults. This may be because they and their local peers do not have memory of the Soviet past and its national divisions. Moreover, youth today tend to be more exposed to liberal and individualistic values and may find the exclusion of “others” as offensive.²⁰ This differentiates them from adults who found it harder to integrate into society and more frequently returned to Kazakhstan.²¹ Several students interviewed for this project agreed that while they were recognized as different, they were not rejected but welcomed by their peers. Their accounts are below:

Since here (Saint Petersburg) half of the students are not citizens of Russia, no one really cares about where you are from—from another city or country. I had no problems. For a long time, I did not even mention that I was from Kazakhstan, and no one even asked. When I eventually said where I am from, people responded in a manner like, “Well, cool,” and that's basically it. I think almost from very beginning I was accepted as *theirs*.²² (Interview 1, female student, Saint Petersburg)

I’m cool. Even if I am Russian, they see me as “exotic” because I am from Kazakhstan, and they are “exotic” to me because up until some point when we are not entirely integrated, we are a bit different. We find it extremely fun and interesting, however. There is no misogyny or dislike. And then after two years of studying together, we all are sort of the same.²³ (Interview 3, female student, Moscow)

After studying here for three years, I hardly feel any separation. Although I felt it when I first moved. It seemed normal because we all have different backgrounds in general. But it gets much easier over time. Moreover, even though initially there was some kind of division like that I am from Kazakhstan and maybe even a Kazakh

¹⁹ Natal’ia Kosmarskaia, “‘Svoi’ kak ‘chuzhie’: identichnost’ i konflikt v usloviakh vnutrietnicheskogo vzaimodeystviia,” *Etnograficheskoe obozrenie* 6 (2015): 3–12.

²⁰ Olga V. Popova and Oleg V. Lagutin, “Political Views of the Youth: Loyalty or Protest?” *RUDN Journal of Political Science* 21, no. 4 (2019): 599–619, <https://doi.org/10.22363/2313-1438-2019-21-4-599-619>

²¹ Kosmarskaya, “Russkie v Tsentral’noy Azii.”

²² Student #1, interview by author, July 10, 2021.

²³ Student #3, interview by author, July 15, 2021.

of some sort, everyone was very friendly with me. Even if this division existed, it did not prevent me from socializing at all.²⁴ (Interview 2, male student, Tomsk)

The university helped a lot. They also gave us a dormitory. Without the help of the university, I am sure that I would not have been able to move peacefully. They helped in collecting documents and in matters of the dormitory. They issued registration documents for entry to and exit from Russia.²⁵ (Interview 4, male student, Tomsk)

Conclusion

To conclude, this research essay aimed at discovering major reasons for ethnic Russian student migration from Kazakhstan to Russia and to identify patterns of migrant integration in the destination country. This essay hypothesized that social and political pressures in Kazakhstan would stand out as major reasons for migration. However, substantial evidence was not found to support this hypothesis. Survey and interview responses varied on that matter. While most students admitted to feeling social pressure regarding their knowledge of Kazakh or labor market expectations in Kazakhstan, only some cited this as the reason for migration. This indicates the wide variation in factors influencing youth migration.

Implications for future study would be interviewing and surveying a larger sample of ethnic Russian immigrants to Russia. In addition, this essay suggested that the common theory of the presence of family networks applies to student migration as well. This hypothesis was supported both in surveys and interviews, indicating that students are more likely to favor migration to Russia if they have relatives there. This was also supported in the extended interviews, where students indicated that the presence of family networks made it easier not only to migrate but to obtain citizenship. As for migrant integration, I expected that integration would be easier for student migrants than for older adult migrants. Although the reasons for this were not studied in depth, the hypothesis was supported both by survey and interview responses. These success stories could, in turn, be a catalyst for increasing student migration of ethnic Russians to Russia. The modest results presented in this essay may be useful for future studies on the phenomenon of ethnicity-based student migration.

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²⁴ Student #2, interview by author, July 15, 2021.

²⁵ Student #4, interview by author, July 16, 2021.