

LABOUR MIGRANTS IN THE GLOBALIZING WORLD

*Dr. Astghik Mirzakhanyan,
UNDP Armenia*

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Ancient words of wisdom assert: “Movement is everything, the goal - nothing”. Perhaps this was particularly justified up to the Middle Ages, since in those times no one attempted to study the reasons behind the flows of human beings from four corners of the world, and thus they only seemed to be “aimless movements”. Thinkers of the time, however, not being particularly concerned with scientific justifications, underlined the positive impact of any dynamism, in any possible direction, on social and human development.

Today, already in the 21st century or the so called “age of information”, scholars use not only their own judgments, but also more pragmatic instruments: facts and statistical data, in order to make empirical calculations of the scales, as well as benefits (and losses) of human movements. Moreover, scholars-philosophers, based on the relevant facts and statistics, distinguish nations by their mobility and dynamism, calling them “passionaries” (Lev Gumilev).

Armenians, who either by fate, or by their own will are scattered all around the world, are also considered to be one of these nations-passionaries. According to different sources of information, 60 to 70 percent of Armenians currently live outside the territory of modern Armenia. In other words, two out of three Armenians are either migrants, or descendants of migrants¹. According to data from the UN for the year 2000, around 3 percent of the world’s population did not live in their countries of origin. This figure for Armenia, according to expert assessments, is around 25 percent, i.e. every fourth person born in Armenia currently lives outside its borders.

According to the latest census (October 2001), there were *de-facto* less people living in Armenia than in 1979. The average natural population growth in the country declined by 1.7 times over the period of 1979-2001, while the migration outflow increased 9-fold amounting to 3 percent of country's population annually. As a result, over the period of 1991-2000, according to the calculations of prominent demographers of the country, the average annual net migration outflow exceeded the average annual net

¹ It must be noted that a small number of Armenians currently live within the territories of historical Armenia, which are no longer part of the Republic of Armenia.

natural population growth by more than 3 times². Evidently, emigration was the main reason behind the enormous population decrease in the mentioned period. It is important to note that labour migration accounted for about 80 percent of the total volume of emigration of the adult population from Armenia.

Within the above-mentioned context, we have used the Armenian phenomenon for approaching the subject of this paper, i.e. labour migration in the globalizing world.

The first and most decisive step toward globalization is widely considered to be the turnaround of one sixth of the world's land surface, occupied by a vast empire, namely the USSR, toward global trends of world development. The Republic of Armenia, being a part of the USSR, declared its political independence after the collapse of the Soviet Union in 1991 and stated its intention to build a democratic and socially oriented state based on free market relationships. With the opening up of its economic space to the outside world, Armenia immediately plummeted into the whirlpool of political-economic flows of global development. The abandoning of the entire set of plan-economy instruments and the total absence of market forces regulating economic development resulted in a chaotic situation in the newly formed republic, which was primarily reflected on the well-being of the population. The drop in national GDP by more than half in 1990-1993, due to the stagnation of industrial production, resulted in job losses and the consequent loss of sustained incomes for nearly half of the working-age population in the country. The mentioned data are in complete correlation with the national poverty level in Armenia, which as of the end of 1996 constituted more than 55 percent and continued to be around 50 percent throughout the subsequent years.

Armenia of the 90s, like all other states with transitional economies, did not have the necessary formal institutions with the capacity to intervene through a timely response in order to balance (absorb) the oversupply of labour force in the already free labour market. Thus it is only natural that the adult population of the country started to solve its employment problems by its own efforts and, as a rule, through migration. Some forms of labour migration from Armenia are classical from the viewpoint of worldwide trends recorded in the globalizing world:

1. Labour migration, accompanied by export of capital

This form of labour migration was particularly characteristic to Armenia in the beginning of the 90s, in the period of the reforms of state administrative structures. Radical changes in power structures, including the complete replacement of personnel and the incapacity of the new formal institutions of the state, including its legislative bodies, resulted in a chaotic situation with regard to the “rule of law”, which in effect “pushed” former heads of party-political, administrative and economic apparatus of the soviet republic out of the country. At the same time, the blockade of transportation and energy supply routes

² A. Karapetyan, R. Yeganyan “Social constants of demographic changes in Armenia”.

imposed on Armenia as a result of the Nagorno-Karabagh conflict forced many small businessmen (owners of newly formed cooperatives³) to emigrate to Russia together with their skilled labour and financial capital, as well as machinery and equipment. Why Russia? Because: a) Armenians did not need visas for traveling to Russia; b) all the old "particratic links", including personal relationships and friendships, were in Russia; c) 90 percent of the markets for Armenian goods was in Russia; d) there were no language barriers, study of the Russian language was mandatory in all Armenian schools; e) until the end of 1993 Armenia was in the "ruble zone", i.e. there were no barriers to financial flows. Former particrats preferred to immigrate to the former center of their party-political activities, namely Moscow, while businessmen who owned cooperatives immigrated to Russia's regions, where previous formal institutions and informal relationships, which were very familiar to soviet type Armenian entrepreneurs, were still operational.

The majority of these people emigrated together with not only their family members, but also long-time and trusted colleagues, workers, "helpers" and of course relatives. This type of labour migration is particularly preferable for countries of destination, since it does not increase the "social burden" of the recipient state, but rather contributes to the improvement of its investment microclimate, stimulates job-creation and increases the wealth of the nation served by these immigrants.

After a certain period of time, these immigrants become the core around which the new Armenian "Diaspora" is formed, such as Union of Russia's Armenians, Ukrainian Armenian Community, etc., which, to the extent possible, continue their active participation in the political and economic life of their former homeland (charity, investments, lobbying during elections, etc.).

2. Shuttle labour migration for seasonal work.

One of the most common forms of migration in Armenia, already since the soviet times, is the so called "job-hunting". It is particularly widespread in the country's agricultural regions, as well as small and medium sized towns, where unemployment is a quite serious problem. In some regions of Armenia, every eighth able-bodied man regularly leaves the country for seasonal work abroad, again mainly in Russia (around 80 percent of them) and other CIS countries (4-5 percent). Seasonal work starts in spring and ends well into autumn and is mainly comprised of work on large constructions or in house repair companies. This particular group of labourers has general and all-purpose skills, with the exception of a small group of specialists with skills in uncommon construction-repair works. Absence of visa requirements and the soft immigration regime for citizens of CIS countries, as well as comparatively lower costs of living and traveling (family members, as a rule, do not travel), make this form of labour migration attractive for not only single young men without particular skills or specialties, but also those who cannot provide for their families with small incomes received from agricultural activities or due to being unemployed.

³ According to official statistics, in early 1989 there were around 4,000 non-farming cooperatives and 20,000 individual entrepreneurs in the Armenian SSR, which accounted for around 6 percent of the total employment in the country.

Shuttle labour migration is prevalent among 7 to 10 percent of the country's able-bodied male population, and reaches up to 13 percent in some economically less developed parts of the country. Among Armenian women, labour migration amounts to less than 1 percent. Remittances from such migrants are, in effect, the main source of income for one out of ten Armenian families.

3. Illegal labour migration.

This type of labour migration has become a cause for concern in Armenia since the mid 90s. It has two forms:

a) legal travel to another country as a tourist or for studies, and the subsequent illegal employment taken up voluntarily in small “unnoticeable” businesses owned mostly by ethnic Armenians, in order to eventually “legalize” residence in the given country (work permit, residence permit, citizenship, etc.). Official statistics indicate the significant scale of illegal migration from Armenia for the entire period of 1991-2000. The experts’ estimations show that this form of migration of Armenians did not yet lose its intensive nature in the 21st century. We cannot fully recognize it as an emigration, because of its illegality. That is why we call it “termless migration” having in mind that the majority of these people will never return to their homeland.

b) legal travel to another country through various channels, and forced employment in illegal types of activities, such as prostitution, slavery, distribution of drugs, etc. This form of migration is distinguished as “trafficking”. Trafficking can be characterized as “statistical darkness”, nobody knows the precise number of victims of trafficking in Armenia. However, the fact that the Armenian Ministry of Foreign Affairs asked UNDP to support the Government in implementing a project for combating trafficking and return of its victims is a solid proof of the expansion of this nightmarish phenomenon of the 21st century in our country as well.

4. Contractual labour migration.

The most welcomed, but regrettably the least developed form of labour migration in modern Armenia, which is already an indication that Armenia is still outside the corresponding globalization processes, with the exception of some of its informal and unorganized aspects. The mere fact that labour issues in the country (and only since 2004 at that) are dealt with by one agency, namely the Ministry of Labour and Social Issues, and migration issues by another entirely separate one, i.e. the Department for Refugees and Migration, already indicates that labour migration issues in Armenia are not coherently managed under one governmental structure. In effect, our government does not deal with that issue in an adequate manner.

Perhaps private companies are involved in legal labour migration issues? Our studies revealed that in fact until recently a number of companies dealt with issues of providing temporary employment for our

citizens (on contractual basis) abroad. All of them, however, went out of business in late 90s, mainly for two reasons: either clients tricked the company, using employment contracts as a suitable chance to leave the country and find appropriate employment by themselves, or companies deceived their clients by taking their money and disappearing without a trace.

With regard to long-term duty travels abroad on the basis of employment contracts with foreign or transnational companies, it must be noted that a very small number of such companies – no more than 5 or 6 -- operate in Armenia. The number of employed in these companies does not even reached 1 percent of the total employment in the country. Consequently, our citizens should not be particularly hopeful to have employment contracts abroad.

Nevertheless, passionary-Armenians somehow find opportunities for legal labour migration: some through the Internet, some through acquaintances and relatives abroad, and some through friends with international careers working in Armenia. Foreign companies, in their turn, seek particularly prominent figures in the world of arts, such as painters, actors, musicians, etc., scientists dealing with fundamental sciences, such as physicists, chemists, mathematicians, radio-electronics and ICT specialists, or very tolerant and hardworking Armenian women who can take care of children, elderly and the sick.

These were the main characteristics of labour migration from a small country, which opened its doors to the outside world literally 10 years ago and lost the most active and promising part of its population with the first breeze of the wind of globalization. The only hope for those who have lost their relatives to the great whirlpool of human movements is that the world, as a whole, has ultimately benefited and that this benefit will eventually translate into better well-being for each and every one of us, either with or without the status of “labour migrant”.