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Azerbaijan in the Context of Circular Migration Processes

Rumyansev Sergey

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In this analysis, I will rely on approaches that were developed at “The Global Forum on Migration and Development (GFMD)” (Brussels, July 2007) both in their original and further evolved forms. I will rely too on “more dynamic notion of circular migration”, in the context of which this type of migration flows are viewed as: “continuing, long-term, and fluid pattern of human mobility among countries that occupy what is now increasingly recognized as a single economic space. <...> At their best circular migration policies align the objectives of origin countries, destination countries, and the migrants who comprise these flows. Circular migration is distinct from temporary migration in that circular migration denotes a migrant’s continuous engagement in both home and adopted countries; it usually involves both return and repetition. Circularity produces the most positive outcomes when migrants move voluntarily between countries to pursue various interests”¹. Thus, I will concur on the premise that *circular migration* implies an interested and reciprocally complementary involvement of three parties: the countries of emigration and immigration, and the actual emigrant. It is this approach that the structure of this text complies with. So:

- *First*, I will analyse the effects of this type of migration that are significant for Azerbaijan as a country of emigration (this being, in my view, the most important aspect);
- *Second*, I will assess the impact of circular migration on Azerbaijan as the country receiving work migrants (though this aspect is not central);
- *Third*, I will offer my thoughts about the situation of work migrants, those leaving Azerbaijan and those arriving in this country to work.

Azerbaijan as the Country of Origin in the Context of Circular Migration Processes

I consider Azerbaijan primarily an emigrant country: certainly the number of emigrants from Azerbaijan is many times higher than the number of immigrants². We do not have any precise data, but the estimates for work migrants vary from 500,000-600,000 to one million or even 1.2 million³. It can be asserted that most work migrants aspire to long (three to five years and more) stays abroad. At the same time, their contacts with the country of origin normally stay firm and active.

1). Policy-framework on circular migration.

The first step toward building an official policy was the “Capacity building for Migration Management” programme, carried out in cooperation with the International Organization for Migration (IOM). The next step in policy on migration regulation came with the “State Migration Management Policy Conception of the Republic of Azerbaijan”, adopted in July 2004. This plan implied international cooperation in the prevention of illegal migration, and in the signing of an international readmission agreement. Moreover, the authorities have acknowledged the need to conclude international agreements, which would help Azerbaijani citizens residing and working abroad.

However, labour migrants still do not receive any form of help from Azerbaijan. No real measures have been taken to prevent the departure of highly-skilled specialists from Azerbaijan (brain drain)

¹Newland K., Agunias D. R., Terrazas A., Learning by Doing: *Experiences of Circular Migration*. Migration Policy Institute (mpi), Program on Migrants, Migration, and Development, September 2008, p. 2.

²According to official data, which are very doubtful in terms of plausibility, in the period from 1990 to 2007 net migration remained negative and was 183.3. Starting from 2008, official statistics recorded a positive net migration. But in the period from 2008 to 2010, positive net was only 3.4. Downloaded from: International Migration, 2010. <http://www.azstat.org/statinfo/demographic/en/index.shtml#>, on 31 May 2012.

³See, for example: Interview with the President of Azerbaijan Ilham Aliyev on the Radio Station “Echo of Moscow”, <http://www.echo.msk.ru/programs/beseda/48358/>, on 26 March 2012; Migration in the Republic of Azerbaijan: A Country Profile. (2008). IOM, International Organization for Migration, p. 17; World Bank Migration and Remittances Factbook. (2011). The World Bank, Washington, p. 25.

and /or to facilitate the return of those who had emigrated from the country before or after the adoption of this plan. There are also no programmes for highly-skilled emigrants to get involved in temporary work in Azerbaijan.

At the same time, the political authorities are conscious of the benefits of circular migration and do their best to preserve the favorable migration regime. Of key importance are relations with Russia where most work migrants go. The preservation of visa-free travel remains the main factor in relations with Russia and the wider CIS. Since 2007, when Russia introduced migration quotas, the authorities have also been trying to preserve conditions beneficial for themselves⁴. On the whole, considering the high level of corruption in all CIS countries, neither the quota principles nor any other laws save the closure of borders or the abolition of visa-free travel will have a major impact on migration flows.

The government adopted an ambitious plan for education programmes in EU countries for 2007-15⁵. Many young Azerbaijani go to study in EU countries and the US regardless of whether or not the Azerbaijani authorities support them, using their own money or scholarships and grants. The authorities claim that they wish to develop these ties. As a rule, the authorities do not interfere with Azerbaijani specialists when they take internships abroad (from 2 month till 2 years and even more). Often, indeed, the specialists are able to reserve their positions at state institutions (Universities, Research Institutes of National Academy of Sciences, etc.).

2) Main strengths and shortcomings of the Azerbaijan's policy-framework on circular migration.

The main challenge is that there are no stable policies for creating the favourable conditions for circular migration. I have only two points to make here:

1. Creating and maintaining conditions for free movement of migrants between Russia and Azerbaijan (migration profitable quotas etc.)⁶;
2. Study abroad programmes for students for 2007-2015 (generally EU countries, Great Britain, US, Japan, Russia and Turkey).

The effect of state programmes and agreements is notably reduced because of high corruption⁷, nepotism and the regional clan system, at which a whole line of command is being built in Azerbaijan⁸. Essential shortcomings include the lack of stable state programmes to promote highly-skilled specialists in seeking temporary employment abroad. The other main shortcomings the very low level of legal support of labour migrants in receiving countries (especially in Russia) and the limited possibilities of their active participation in the homeland's political life (parliamentary and presidential elections). The Azerbaijan authorities do not limit migrant contacts with their families in

⁴The first intergovernmental (Azerbaijani-Russian) agreement aiming at adjusting work migration was signed in 1994. This agreement was confirmed by "Friendship Agreement" (1997). The latest such agreement in 2012 was "Agreement between the government of the Russian Federation and the government of the Azerbaijani Republic on cooperation in the field of work migration". Downloaded from: <http://pravo.gov.ru/laws/acts/9/494948451088.html> on 30 August.

⁵According to the Azerbaijani Education Ministry, about 5,000 students are to study in EU countries, the USA, Japan, etc. under the "State Programme on education of Azerbaijani youth in foreign countries in 2007-15". Downloaded from: <http://www.edu.gov.az/view.php?lang=ru&menu=256> on 30 August.

⁶In the middle of 1990s Russia kept land frontiers with Azerbaijan closed for a long period of time. This created obstacles for the free movement of migrants. Since 2007 Russia has enacted migrations quota system. This stirred up particular resentment in Azerbaijan. As a rule, the Azerbaijan authorities were trying to react as soon as quickly: conducted negotiations, concluded new agreements with Russia etc.

⁷Global Corruption Report (2009). Corruption and the Private Sector. Transparency International, Cambridge University Press, p. p. 49, 115, 401.

⁸ Abbasov Sh. (2011), Achievements and Missed Opportunities. In: South Caucasus: 20 Years of Independence, Berlin: Friedrich-Ebert-Stiftung, pp.108-122.

Azerbaijan (financial support/remittances etc.). But they do interfere with their wide and free political implications in the homeland Azerbaijan.

At the same time the support of educational programmes abroad may be considered as a key strength of state policy in the sphere of circular migration. Despite the weaknesses of state programmes (corruption etc.) the Azerbaijan regime in principle does not interfere with activity of citizens therein⁹. Put in other terms, these migrants can remain registered at their place of residence: this helps in drawing up all necessary documents in the country of origin. Some of them can keep their job positions too.

Directions and driving forces of circular mobility dynamics of Azerbaijan

Most labour migrants go to CIS countries and particularly to Russia. Considering the focus of this analysis, I do not view the issue of emigrant remittances from CIS or EU countries, etc. as the key one. At least once a year though most labour migrants pay relatively long visits to Azerbaijan: typically spending their holidays there. Normally migrants bring along a great deal of money. How much money is unknown because these financial flows are carried through the border in cash and cannot be recorded in statistics¹⁰. However, we can assert that a migrant (especially if s/he arrives in Azerbaijan together with a family) brings on average more money than they can transfer home in the space of a year. This assertion can also be applied to a smaller group of migrants who work in two countries at the same time for many years (three to five years and more) in different periods. These include artists and persons involved in art, cultural activities, etc. (primarily musicians) who find work in Turkey during the tourist season; as well as migrants who work in construction or trade. Normally, when leaving for several months a year, migrants do not transfer money through the banks. Rather they carry the money they earn in cash when they return home.

Most emigrants from Azerbaijan (including a significant part of those who left their country for ever) keep property, or invest money in Azerbaijan, if their earnings allow them to accumulate enough savings. Mostly ‘property’ means flats in urban areas or houses with land in the countryside. In this way, they facilitate the stabilization of the market and keep house prices high. What is more important, these investments facilitate the circular nature of migration and help sustain it. Very often Azeri migrants buy real estate in Azerbaijan (they built private houses and buy flats and plots of land). This kind of investment facilitates construction and also maintains high prices for real estate. Work migrants from Azerbaijan to CIS countries show the greatest activity in purchase of real estate in Azerbaijan. A considerable part of emigrants to the EU and other countries also prefer to invest part of their money in real estate in their home country. However here it should be stressed that far fewer Azerbaijani nationals leave for EU countries than for CIS countries.

Such investments have to do with the low political activity of work migrants. Most work migrants invest their finances in the country of origin. They do not necessarily expect major change but rather they hope that the current “stable situation” will continue. In addition, hard work conditions (long working hours - 10 to 12 hours and more, illegal status, lack of registration, etc¹¹), and the inaccessibility of polling stations are also a serious obstacle to their political activity: it should be noted that the number and geographical distribution of polling stations outside Azerbaijan do not reflect the settlement patterns of work migrants,. The ruling authoritarian political regime is no doubt happy about this situation. The fact that a considerable part of the able-bodied population of the

⁹ Unlike, for instance, Belarusian and Turkmenistan regimes.

¹⁰ Even excluding this money in 2009 the World Bank Migration and Remittances Factbook placed Azerbaijan in the top ten of recipient countries and estimated a total amount of remittances of 1.5 billion USD per year.

¹¹ See, for example: Hancilova B., Allakhveranov A., Zeynalova M., Khudiyeva N. (2008), Determinants of Labour Exploitation and Trafficking in Azerbaijan: An Exploratory Overview, EU.

republic finds work outside this country and that it is effectively stranded from political life decreases risks for the regime. It also, naturally, hampers reforms in the country.

Turkey is another of those countries where migrants flows are directed. As with Russia, Azerbaijani citizens go to Turkey to work or study. However, the volume of migrant exchange with Turkey is not equal to the exchange with Russia. Then also a considerable number of young women go to work in sex industry in Turkey, the Arab Emirates, Pakistan and others countries in the region.

Fewer citizens of Azerbaijan go to EU countries, the US and Canada for various reasons. First of all, the main obstacle is the visa regime. The second obstacle is the language barrier (that is absent for migration to CIS countries and Turkey). These circumstances complicate the possibilities of employment. In the meantime, the EU countries, the US and Canada remain attractive because of high-living standards there. As a result, a certain number of citizens have been leaving Azerbaijan for the EU (especially Germany, the UK, Sweden and Holland). Generally, such migrants intend to stay in the EU for a long period of time. A number even seek political asylum. Many of them prefer to stay after receiving education. As a rule, such migrants have close connections with their home country.

Thereby, the main reasons/motives of circular migration in CIS countries are economic ones. A lack of well-paid work drives hundreds of thousands of people of working age to leave the country each year. For the same reasons Azerbaijan citizens leave too for other countries (Turkey, the United Arab Emirates, Pakistan, etc.).

In principle the same reasons force Azerbaijanis to emigrate to EU countries, the US and Canada. However, having emigrated to these countries, Azerbaijan citizens sought to stay there permanently. At the same time, they maintain strong links with their home country. It should be noted that these countries are attractive for those who want to get qualified education (along with Turkey). As a rule, political refugees from Azerbaijan are directed to EU countries.

Two key points can be singled out that provide the greatest benefits to the regime that rules the country.

Point *one* is that a major outflow of able-bodied people allows high incomes from corruption schemes to be maintained, through which a major part of money ascribed to the state budget goes. If there was not a massive outflow of emigrants, the authorities would have to invest a major part of the money in the stabilization of the socio-economic situation in the country.

Point *two* is that the Azerbaijani authorities have a large reserve work force that can always be involved in works in the country. For example, the construction boom in Azerbaijan has allowed many work migrants in the past few years to come back to this country. The authorities are able then to involve the necessary number of workers, without needing long-term planning for their employment and social security.

Circular migration has also become a convenient channel in providing work to highly-qualified specialists who do not strive to emigrate forever and who fail to find a permanent job in this country¹². These are mainly musicians, teachers at universities, etc. Most of them find work in Turkey or CIS countries. Effectively, here, too, the political regime has a privileged position as it has an opportunity to attract these migrants to work in the country of origin should such a need arise.

However, the post-soviet generation who received their education abroad, primarily in the EU countries and the US have gone unheard. The government does not aspire to attract such students into the country, the most ambitious and successful of whom remain in the countries where they received their education. At the same time, the nepotism and corruption in Azerbaijan undermine the value of

¹²In turn, in 2008 Azerbaijan saw the start of the development of regulations for the establishment of migration quotas for foreigners, which proceeded under the patronage of the Ministry of Labour and Social Security. In 2010, the quota was 10,700, and in 2011 9,815.

the students who receive education on scholarships made available to them by the state. At the same time, these kinds of emigrants preserve close ties with Azerbaijan and, undoubtedly, are a resource for reforms that may take place in the future or for democratization of the political field.

Effect of circular migration on Azerbaijan as a host country

The main effect of circular migration for Azerbaijan as the host country is the opportunity to attract a relatively small number of highly-qualified work migrants. That is a very restricted group of people. For example, there are about 5,000 Turkish citizens and 1,500 UK citizens officially working in this country. There are many of the former in the construction business, where they are particularly important as engineers, while the British typically work in the oil business. One can assume that such specialists could be recruited from among local residents too. However, it is more advantageous for the oil companies to bring their own people in. Considering the significance of the oil extraction industry for the country, the regime is prepared to make concessions to these major transnational oil concerns and so create attractive conditions for them.

One should not overestimate the overall impact of work immigration into Azerbaijan. But one more aspect should be pointed out. Azerbaijan borders Iran, a considerable part of whose population are, in ethnic terms, Azeris. Azerbaijan attracts a certain number of ethnic Azeris from Iran who come there to buy real estate, i.e. while living mainly in Iran they invest money in Azerbaijan: they have doubts about the stability of the Iranian regime and see Azerbaijan as a possible haven. And this is also part of that migration potential which allows the construction market to expand, and which maintains high prices for real estate in Azerbaijan. Also, many ethnic Azeris from Georgia find jobs in Azerbaijan. However, in their case, the effect of immigration is very low. Often they fail to find a legal job they become illegal migrants.

Effect of circular migration on migrants

The preservation of ties and contacts across the former USSR allows many citizens of Azerbaijan to improve their material situation by migrating. At the same time, the preservation of a common economic space for CIS countries allows migrants to keep up very frequent contacts with their country of origin. In principle, there are no serious obstacles to the preservation of such contacts for those migrants that live and work in EU countries. Traditional intra-family ties (i.e. expanded type of family that consists of three and more generations) remain and also push the migrants into maintaining firm ties with their country of origin. In addition, for migrants from Azerbaijan, most of whom are from the countryside, the preservation of firm ties with their “small motherland” (i.e. their village/settlement) is of the utmost importance: this means ties with the wide network of close and distant relatives and fellow countrymen. So, there is no doubt that the opportunity for preserving such family ties and ties with fellow-countrymen suits the migrants themselves, too. This may mean that emigrants are uncertain about their future in the country where they are. On the other hand, this implies a wider opportunity of choice in investing free money.

5) Recommendations

There has long been a need to develop regulations for the provision of long-term residency permits for migrants in CIS countries. It is also important to facilitate dual citizenship. Most European countries do not require migrants to abandon their first citizenship and this is undoubtedly the right approach. The lack of norms for receiving a long-term residency permit and dual citizenship in CIS countries facilitates the preservation of high levels of corruption.

Certain changes are needed in respect of those who go to study in EU countries and the US. Countries that receive these students need to monitor their level of education in a more serious

fashion. At the same time, conditions need to be created for students who study without support from Azerbaijan (on grants and scholarships) under which they can maintain frequent contact with Azerbaijan. Many of them never come back to Azerbaijan because they cannot find a place for themselves in their country. However, they offer a potential channel for ideas and norms of democratic system which could have an essential impact on changes in this country. In order to implement this potential, support programmes for short teaching courses/workshops/different kinds of summer schools could be organized in Azerbaijan and these could be delivered by such specialists.

Finally, it all depends on priorities. If, for instance, EU countries are in need of migrants from Azerbaijan, then special-purpose programmes for circular migrants should be created and developed. Within a framework of these programmes they would be able to search for work and to acquire language skills in Azerbaijan before they return home. The Azerbaijani authorities interested in reduced pressure on the labour market and social sphere could organize such language courses. For the implementation of such projects programme information centres are necessary With easily accessible information for potential migrants. This sphere should be controlled by EU agencies directly because corruption and lack of transparency are the main obstacles in spreading this kind of information in Azerbaijan.