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Circular Migration in Armenia

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National policy-making on circular migration

Circular migration has been a feature of Armenian life since Soviet times. However, neither in the Soviet period nor currently is there any relevant state policy. In recent years circular labor migration has been largely advocated by the EU¹ to facilitate labor migrants' entry to host countries and their benefits from the experience. In the case of circular labor migration, migrants will direct funds to their native lands and gain work experience.

Since 2008 the government of Armenia has expressed its interest in cooperating with the European Union (EU) in managing labour migration issues. Establishing circular labour migration schemes with the EU has been raised and discussed by Armenian migration policy makers. Various policy dissemination workshops have been organized, among these the workshop in the framework of TAIEX² where some of EU labour migration management practices were discussed, such as legal work opportunities in the EU countries (European Pact on Immigration and Asylum – Blue Card and Circular Migration), new policies and practice in the EU: the liberalization of foreign labor usage in some Member States (the case of Sweden), the EU practice on bilateral agreements with countries of origin; and cooperation in circular migration schemes (the case of Portugal), etc.

Yet, several issues on circular migration have been of particular interest to Armenian policy-makers: *what is the difference between circular migration and seasonal migration? Are there circular migration schemes for highly-skilled migrants or is circular migration envisaged only for migrants with low qualifications? Are there such schemes only for former colonies and metropolises? What measures (legislative, institutional, campaign and etc.) should countries of origin carry out to be included in such a process?*

According to Armenian policy, one of the main tools for combating illegal migration is legal labour migration, and circular migration schemes are one option here³. And in the case of the EU the legal preconditions of circular migration were part of a Joint Declaration on a Mobility Partnership (MP) signed between Armenia and the EU in October 2011. Among other goals the Mobility Partnership has the purpose of better managing legal and labour migration, including circular and temporary migration, to promote a better framework for legal and labour mobility, including the facilitation of temporary and circular migration, supported by more information and concrete and effective initiatives as well as the protection of migrants⁴. In the Annex to the Declaration several initiatives are mentioned that countries are intended to take in the framework of the MP: a proposal by France to promote the circular mobility of young professionals and students; a proposal by Italy, Poland and Sweden to share information on migration through legal channels, including circular migration; a proposal by Romania to inform potential migrant workers from Armenia on legal migration opportunities and the risks related to irregular immigration, etc⁵.

However, one year after the MP was signed there have still been no steps to implement the MP.

¹ European Migration Network Inform (2011). "The interest in temporary and circular migration within the EU is primarily due to its perceived potential as a "triple win" policy tool for managed migration, because it may benefit the host society, as well as the migrant and the migrant's country of origin. Such forms of migration may provide a short-term workforce in the host country to fill labour and skills shortages and to meet the emerging needs of national labour markets more generally; support development in third countries; and reduce the phenomenon of "brain drain"."

² TAIEX Workshop on EU experience in labour migration management, accessed 15 August, 2012. <http://www.backtoarmenia.com/?page=news&nid=135>

³ "Concept for studying and prevention of irregular migration launching from the Republic of Armenia", approved by the Armenian Government protocol decision № 51 from 29 December 2011. Available at: <http://smsmta.am/?id=1012> . Accessed 5 September, 2012.

⁴ Joint Declaration on a Mobility Partnership between Armenia and the EU, p. 4.

⁵ The Annex to the Joint Declaration on a Mobility Partnership between Armenia and the EU, p. 2.

Circular migration schemes are also an effective tool for the regulation of the intensive emigration flows from Armenia according to the academics and civil-society representatives active in migration work in Armenia. *“An ideal model of Armenian circular migration is that migrants act collectively as working groups rather than as individuals. In this approach the circular migration can be conceptualized as a form of organized exportation of national labour force. Circular migration would need to be facilitated and encouraged by policies protecting the residence and naturalization rights of migrants in their host countries.”* (Poghosyan and Manasyan, 2012, p. 34)

The active involvement of NGOs needs also to be mentioned. In particular, enabling an environment for circular migration in Armenia is one of the key areas of the “Strengthening Evidence-Based Management of Labour Migration in Armenia” project⁶. The Project is jointly implemented by the ICHD (International Centre for Human Development) and the IOM (International Organization for Migration). It is a three-year project funded by the European Union with the aim of preventing the irregular migration of Armenian residents through the regulation of labour migration in Armenia. The project has also drafted the Terms of Reference: a guide for the creation and production of Five Country Guides for Planned and Semi-Planned Circular Labour Migration from Armenia to the EU. The ultimate purpose of the Five Country Guides is to provide ample information to unskilled and low-skilled workers involved in (planned or semi-planned) circular labour migration on country-specific procedures and requirements for engaging in planned or semi-planned circular migration; on the rights of labour migrants and other specifics; to increase awareness about legal circular labour migration; and to improve the management of migration, as well as to reduce irregular emigration from Armenia to the EU⁷.

The ICHD project is also the first attempt in Armenia to give conceptual definitions to “circular migration” in the Terms of Reference of the guidelines. According to this definition: *“Circular Labour Migration refers to the short term cross-border movements of people with the purpose to work”*. Besides the general definition there are also 2 other definitions: *“Planned Circular Labour Migration implies the utilization of a 3rd party involved in the CLM process, i.e. a PEA (Private Employment Agency) or any other form of recruitment agency operating on legal terms (e.g. employment contract/service contract) in compliance with Armenian national legislation, national legislation of target EU country and EU legislation”* and *“Semi-Planned Circular Labour Migration is a form of circular labor migration which does not involve a 3rd party, i.e. a private employment service or any other form of recruitment agency operating on legal terms (e.g. employment contract/service contract). In the process of semi-planned circular labor migration, arrangement and utilization of services assisting in the job search, financial arrangement etc. are done privately”*.

The first practical guide is intended for citizens of Armenia who plan to engage in planned or semi-planned circular labor migration to Sweden⁸. It provides a brief overview of life in Sweden, describes job searching, applications and other preparatory actions. It also provides details about procedures related to work permits and resident permits. The guide lists institutions and methods for protecting one’s interests while working as a circular labor migrant.

Despite elaborate policy initiatives, there are no concrete mechanisms or tools (signed agreements, etc.) in place to organize circular migration from Armenia either with the EU, the CIS or other third countries as of September 2012. Some steps have been taken only with the State of Qatar. But an agreement for the involvement of Armenian skilled labor force (in particular healthcare workers) in Qatar has only been pre-signed. The United Arab Emirates has also expressed an interest in bilateral

⁶ The web page of the “Strengthening Evidence-Based Management of Labour Migration in Armenia” project. Available at: <http://www.ulisses.am/eng/about-project/>. Accessed 25 August, 2012.

⁷ “Terms of Reference Five Country Guides for Planned and Semi-Planned Circular Labour Migration from Armenia to the EU”, 10.01.2012. Prepared by the ULISSES Unit within the ICHD.

⁸ The First Practical Guide for Planned and Semi-Planned Circular Labour Migrants from Armenia to Sweden is available at: <http://www.ulisses.am/eng/news/22/>. Accessed on September 3, 2012.

cooperation with Armenia in the field of labor migration. Currently Armenia is negotiating on bilateral agreements with two European Countries – France and Bulgaria.

a) Circular mobility between Armenia and the European Union:

The section above focused on circular migration. This section expands the concept and examines circular mobility, rather than migration.

The main flows between EU member-states and Armenia are for study purposes, economic reasons, family reunification, etc. However, most Armenian citizens leave for European countries due to economic reasons. But it should be mentioned that there is no circularity between Armenia and the EU since many people entering the EU are afraid to return because they are not sure if they will have chance to enter the Schengen area again. Therefore, temporary visitors do not leave EU countries when their visas (tourist, medical, student, etc.) expire, thus becoming irregular immigrants and they take jobs on the black market. In order to receive legal residence in the host country and to have access to social services they submit asylum applications. In most cases asylum applications are rejected, and hence, the migrants remain irregular migrants and remain in the host EU member state or they are sent back to Armenia.

According to UNHCR, Armenia is the other 40 countries in the world whose citizens most frequently sought asylum in Europe in 2011 (17th in 2010)⁹. 6,037 Armenians applied for asylum in European countries in 2011, an increase by a thousand compared to the year before (5,059 in 2010)¹⁰. The number of applications for asylum from Armenians in France doubled in 2011 to more than 3,600 as compared to the previous year's figure, making citizens of Armenia the third largest group of asylum seekers in France after Russians and citizens of the Democratic Republic of the Congo.

Thus, emigration from Armenia to EU countries starts, typically, as a legal trip but becomes irregular in countries of destination when legal stays expire. The reason for that are difficulties with acquiring the Schengen visa and lack of opportunities in finding jobs (high skilled and low skilled) in EU countries. The total volumes of migration from Armenia to European countries after its independence are about 150,000¹¹.

Perhaps, circularity will be facilitated after the implementation of the MP and the signing of a Visa Facilitation Agreement with the EU.

Official statistics on the number of Armenian citizens studying abroad do not exist. However, as the 2008 OSCE survey suggests, more than half of student migrants (56%) went to study in Russia, and 26% went to the European Union: student migration involved less than 1% of Armenian households (OSCE, 2008, p.12). Armenian students are studying abroad in different educational institutions of European countries. In most cases, the education programs granted the student a scholarship covering tuition, transportation, and other expenses and returning to the country of origin after studies is usually a precondition of educational programs.

In order to prevent irregular emigration flows from Armenia some steps have already been made. Awareness raising companies with the purpose of preventing illegal emigration from Armenia and of publicizing legal opportunities have been organized in the *marzes* (regions) of Armenia. These are the regional seminars for groups responsible for migration issues: journalists, staff responsible for providing social and employment services at regional centers, local government officials, and

⁹ UNHCR (2011) Asylum Levels and Trends in Industrialised countries. Available at: <http://www.unhcr.org/4e9beaa19.html>

¹⁰ Ibid.

¹¹ Speech of the Head of the Migration Service of Armenia Gagik Yeganyan in the international conference “Two Pillars of European Integration: Values and Practices” held in Yerevan on 21-22 November, 2011 was organized by the International Centre for Human Development NGO.

representatives of private employment agencies and non-governmental organizations. Seminars are organized by different NGOs in close cooperation with the Migration Service of Armenia.

b) Circular mobility between Armenia and the CIS:

Seasonal labour emigration to Russia and to other Soviet Republics began in the 1960s and this phenomenon is known among the population as a “khopan” (Armenian folk term for leaving to work abroad)¹². It was a spontaneous response to the significant differences between the levels of socio-economic development in the different administrative-territorial units of the country, and quickly grew into a stable and large-scale phenomenon. As a result, by the mid-1980s, the number of spring-fall labour emigrants reached about 1% of Armenia’s total population and about 2% of the country’s labour resources (annually, about 30,000-40,000 people) (UNDP, 2009, p. 30). The destinations were no longer limited to the Southern regions of Russia (which used to be the most popular destination for the majority of the labour emigrants). The geography rapidly expanded to cover all of Russia, including the far North and the East, extending beyond Russia to Kazakhstan. This outflow, which consisted mainly of active working-age men, was typically engaged in construction (UNDP, 2009, p. 30).

Since 1988 the migration situation in Armenia changed abruptly on account of interrelated factors: inter-ethnic conflicts (first and foremost the Karabakh crisis); the 1988 earthquake, and the political, social, and economic transition including the collapse of the USSR, the economic and energy blockade, the transition to a market economy, the collapse of the industry and fundamental structural shifts in the economy. During this period, the phenomenon of seasonal/long-term external labour migration changed too. The number of temporary labour emigrants fell in the late 1980s. Some of them used their experience of contract work, savings, and contacts in destination countries to get involved in the emerging cooperative business “кооперативы” mostly in Armenia, but also in the labour migration destination countries (UNDP, 2009, p. 39). The latter transformed into either permanent emigration or a new phenomenon for the migration situation of Armenia, so-called “long-term external labour migration”: work and travel lasting a year or more, which became the most prevalent migration flow from the country in the early post-Soviet period. In the aftermath of the earthquake, 1989-1991, the phenomenon practically disappeared. Virtually all of the long-term external labour migrants became involved in the restoration of the earthquake zone. Recovery efforts almost fully ground to a halt after the collapse of the USSR, forcing many of them to resume journeys abroad as early as in 1992. However, subject to the radically changed political, social and economic conditions of the post-Soviet area, the seasonal labour migration flows again turned into a survival strategy (UNDP, 2009, p. 39).

This has resulted in migration features such as:

- Duration uncertainty: with the potential of changing from seasonal to permanent, from short-term up to one year, to long-term,
- Multi-sector nature: migrants became engaged not only in construction, but also in trade, public catering, production and services.
- Low thresholds of earnings: deteriorating working, living and housing conditions.
- Increase in the risk posed by migration: travel, nature of employment, etc.

¹² The absence of jobs in Armenia, regardless of stable jobs, well-paid jobs or any jobs, deservingly takes the spotlight in the discussion about the reasons for labour migration. However, some other reasons may account too for Armenian migration activity. One of them is the tradition of “khopan”. Surveys showed that in some villages, from which many men have been continuously leaving to work abroad over a long period of time, labour migration has become a traditional way to support families. Many young men from these villages leave to work abroad after they have completed their military service. At this point they have to think about how to earn money for their future family. These young men do not make serious efforts to find a job in Armenia; they just leave, as their fathers or uncles did before them (ILO, 2009, p.9).

Presumably, this played a significant role in the formation of a huge flow of “new labour migrants” (those who had not previously been labour migrants).

During 2002-2007 labour migrants dominated the external migration flows from Armenia (OSCE, 2008, p. 55). In the specified period of time, labour migrants constituted 94% of all migrants (while only 3% left Armenia with a purpose to permanently reside abroad, and 2% had an intention to study abroad). Annually, about 60,000 labour migrants go to seek jobs in Russia (ILO, 2009, p. 17). The majority of them engaged in labour migration more than once. The overwhelming majority of migrants are 20-54 years old men (80%).

The majority of seasonal migrants have a tendency to leave the country either at the beginning or at the end of spring and to return to Armenia by the end of autumn/beginning of winter. As for the duration of the trip, the majority of migrants stayed abroad between 5 and 11 months. Consequently, the mean actual duration of the trip was nine months, which is in fact somewhat longer than the average duration initially planned by the migrants (ILO, 2009, p. 10).

The main labour emigration flows from Armenia are move towards Russia (up to 90%) and some other CIS countries including Ukraine, Belarus and Kazakhstan. There are no special visa regimes between Armenia and most CIS countries. Besides, travel expenses are cheaper compared to travel to European countries. Knowledge of Russian by Armenian migrants and cultural similarities also makes Russia and CIS countries more attractive destinations. Those migrants who leave for Russia (and particularly for Moscow) can move more freely and repeatedly return to Armenia. Circular migration seems desirable from the point of view of both Armenia and Russia: Russia receives labour and skills, while Armenia benefits from remittances sent by migrants and from returning skilled migrants.

c) Circular mobility between Armenia and third countries (non-CIS and non-EU):

Circular mobility between Armenia and third countries (non-CIS and non-EU) is very low. There are foreign students who come to study in Armenian higher-educational institutions, labour immigrants who come for work purposes as well as diaspora Armenians from Middle East countries (Lebanon, Syria, Iran, etc.) for holidays.

The number of foreign students in Armenia stood at about 5,300 persons in 2009/2010, of whom 1,200 were citizens of CIS countries (Armenia Extended Migration Profile, 2011, p. 33). Almost half of foreign students studying in Armenia were of Armenian origin: they usually arrive from Georgia, Iran, the Russian Federation, Syria, and the United States. Non-Armenian foreign students arrive in Armenia mainly from Iran, India, Syria, the Russian Federation, and China.

The Law on the Legal status of Aliens provides that aliens have to receive a work permit in order to work in the Republic of Armenia; however, this provision is not in force at the moment, as there is no competent authority which would be responsible for the implementation of this provision. Taking into account the described situation, it is difficult to determine how many foreigners arrive in Armenia to work. The majority of foreigners, working on the territory of the Republic of Armenia are citizens of Iran, as well as ethnic Armenians, arriving from Georgia. It must be noted that these are only experts' estimates, as reliable statistics on this category of persons do not exist (Armenia Extended Migration Profile, 2011, p. 33).

With regard to the Armenians leaving for third countries the migration flows to the US needs to be mentioned: it stands at around 10% of the migration flows, but there is no circularity¹³.

On a broader scale more than 55,000 citizens of Armenia have immigrated to the US 1991-2008 (Gharakhanyan 2009, p. 4).¹⁴ The mean age was 40, and the prevailing mass, approximately 55 percent,

¹³ “Armenia to apply circular migration principle”, in Tert.am on November 21, 2011. Available at: <http://www.tert.am/en/news/2011/11/21/gagikeganyan/>. Accessed on August 25, 2012.

were females. Armenian citizens were immigrating to the US with the intention of permanent residence. Hence, only 892 persons or around 1.5 % of the total (55,000) have returned to Armenia (Gharakhanyan V., 2009, p. 17). And it should be noted that the overwhelming majority of these people (returnees) were obliged by the U.S. authorities to leave the country because of illegal stays there.

According to the same research there are more favourable conditions in the US that attract Armenians' attention more than any other country:

- a) It is possible to find a job in the US in a comparatively short period of time if a permit of entry to the country is obtained;
- b) The US, apart from being a country of safety and wealth, has a very soft policy towards immigrants, granting them citizenship and permanent resident status with more simplified orders in comparison with other countries;
- c) Many citizens of Armenia had, and still have, relatives and friends in the US who were, and still are, ready to help and assist them financially both to immigrate and to settle in the new world permanently.

Circulation and return are an integral part of the whole process of development, and are driven by development in home and host countries. Such circular and temporary migration can be managed to promote development in Armenia. Concluding agreements on circular migration and the development of implementing mechanisms of these agreements with the countries of destination would be beneficial for all sides involved in the migration process: for a country of origin, a country of destination and for the migrant themselves.

(Contd.) _____

¹⁴ Gharakhanyan V. "The Number and Reintegration of Armenian Migrants Returned to Homeland from the United States of America: 1991-2008", Yerevan, 2009. Research has been implemented in the scope of the CRRC Research Fellowship Program, financed by the Carnegie Corporation of New York.

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