



Analytical Report

China's "Belt and Road" Initiative and Its Impact on Migration Flows and Policies in Central Asia

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ABSTRACT

The report focuses on analysis of China's "Belt and Road" Initiative (BRI) and more specifically on the Silk Road Economic Belt (SREB) project, representing the component aiming to build land transport corridors from China through Central Asia (CA) to Europe – and its impact on migration flows and policies in the CA region. The report analyzes the importance of SREB for the land-locked countries in the region, identifies the main migration trends that have developed in the context of the movement of capital, goods, services, and labor force from China; analyzes individual types of migrations by countries. Despite the increasing mobility in the region and the importance of regulating migration, the regional cooperation, including the harmonization of policies and information exchange, is not well established. Systematic research and forecast of the migration processes provoked by SREB/BRI are unavailable.

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Abbreviations

APR	Asia-Pacific Region
BCP	Border crossing point (at the border)
BGS	Border Guard Service, NSC, RK
BRI	“Belt and Road” Initiative (China)
CA	Central Asia
CIS	Commonwealth of Independent States – former Soviet republics, with the exception of the Baltic States, Georgia, and Ukraine
CNPC	China National Petroleum Corporation
EAEU	Eurasian Economic Union (since 2015)
EKR	East Kazakhstan Region of the RK
FDI	Foreign Direct investment
FL	Foreign labor force
GDP	Gross Domestic Product
JSC	Joint Stock Company
KR	Kyrgyz Republic
MFA	Ministry for Foreign Affairs
MIA	Ministry of Internal Affairs
MLSPP	Ministry of Labor and Social Protection of Population of the RK
NSC	National Security Committee of the RK
ORP	Oil Refinery Plant
PRC	People’s Republic of China
RF	Russian Federation
RK	Republic of Kazakhstan
RT	Republic of Tajikistan
RU	Republic of Uzbekistan
SCO	Shanghai Cooperation Organisation
SEA	South-East Asia
SKR	South Kazakhstan Region
SREB	Silk Road Economic Belt
UN	United Nations
UNDP	United Nations Development Programme
WB	World Bank
XUAR	Xinjiang Uygur Autonomous Region

Abbreviations

bln – billion
km – kilometer
mln – million

Legend

US \$/USD – US dollar

INTRODUCTION

1.1. CONTEXT: CHINA'S «BELT AND ROAD» INITIATIVE: 2013-2018

PRC President Xi Jinping first announced the project for the joint construction of the Silk Road Economic Belt (SREB) on 7 September 2013. Together with the joint construction of the 21st Century Maritime Silk Road, proposed in October 2013, the mega project “One Belt, One Road” was developed, announced by Xi Jinping in March 2015.¹

The Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) is a project to build land transport corridors from China through Central Asia (CA)² to Europe and to develop maritime routes through the seas of the Pacific and Atlantic oceans (Annex 1). The BRI strategic document identifies the following key cooperation priorities: political coordination, interconnection of infrastructure, uninterrupted trade, free movement of capital, and strengthening of proximity between nations.³

Today, the “Belt and Road” initiative has become a strategy for China’s internal and external development, a “brand umbrella” under which virtually all of China’s projects inside and abroad are implemented, addressing all areas of cooperation: investment, trade and economy, humanitarian, etc. The deep penetration of the BRI ideas into the PRC foreign and domestic policy is evidenced by the fact that in October 2017 the implementation of the Initiative was included into the Chinese Communist Party Charter.⁴

All types of cooperation in the framework of SREB – from trade and economic to humanitarian – are associated with the cross-border movement of people, i.e. migration. However, the SREB/BRI documents pay minimal attention to migration and related issues. Indirectly, they are covered in the section “Strengthening the proximity between nations”. The envisaged collaboration includes cultural and scientific exchanges, exchanges of personnel, contacts between young people and women, student exchanges, joint trainings, festivals, years of culture and other events in the countries along the Silk Road.⁵

The concept of “migration” is not mentioned in the document even once; “mobility” is used once; the concepts related to the labor market (workforce, labor market, employment) are used only five times, and “movement” is only used in the context of movement of capital and resources.⁶ The issues of human mobility, labor migration, visa regimes, and humanitarian cooperation in general were not properly addressed by the document at the time of its articulation.

Meanwhile, migration and visa issues are becoming ever more relevant today, including in the context of implementation of the SREB/BRI projects in Eurasia. The successful construction of some large and many local projects in the countries along the Silk Road testifies to positive prospects for BRI implementation⁷, including in the Central Asian countries. Several important infrastructure facilities were built or are under construction here,⁸ which contributed to increased migration to the region, including labor migration.

The Central Asian republics vary considerably in their level of socio-economic development, demographic potential, history and dynamics of migration processes (Annex, Table 1). The complementarity of interests and needs of China in Central Asia and Central Asian republics in China (investments, natural resources, sales markets, labor market needs, etc.) determined the relative success of PRC economic progress in the region in the 2000s. At the same time, in the process of building SREB, risks in Central Asia increase, just like in other countries of Eurasia, where the project is being implemented. Because of Chinese loans, the national debt of Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan, the two poorest countries in the region, is increasing. Negotiations and tenders are closed, while the migration of Chinese labor force increases the tensions in the local communities. SREB opens up new opportunities and prospects for mobility in the region, but the issue has not yet become an object of study.

¹ PRC MFA and PRC Ministry of Commerce, 2015.

² The Central Asian countries in this report are the five post-Soviet republics: Republic of Kazakhstan (RK), Kyrgyz Republic (KR), Republic of Tajikistan (RT), Turkmenistan (TM) and Republic of Uzbekistan (RU).

³ Ibid.

⁴ Silkroad.news.cn, 2018.

⁵ PRC MFA and PRC Ministry of Commerce, 2015.

⁶ Calculated by the author on the basis of the primary statistical analysis. In addition to the often repeated name of the “Belt and Road” Initiative and geographical names, the most frequent were: among the “Principles”: cooperation – 118 times, establishment – 52, development – 50 times. Next come economic terms (construction, trade, investment, energy, etc.), the concepts of “culture” and “humanitarian exchanges” are used 19 times. Then in the descending order: tourism – 8, science and scientific cooperation – 7; education and students – 5; “visas” are mentioned once. (PRC MFA and PRC Ministry of Commerce, 2015).

⁷ China-trade-research.hktdc.com, 2017; Yamada & Palma, 2018.

⁸ Large PRC projects in CA: the dry port of Khorgos at the border of Kazakhstan and China, where the International Center of Boundary Cooperation is located; a highway connecting China, Kyrgyzstan and Uzbekistan, a highway in Tajikistan; energy projects, e.g., the Turkmenistan-China gas pipeline and oil refineries in Kazakhstan, etc.

1.2. GOALS, OBJECTIVES, AND RELEVANCE OF THE RESEARCH

Currently, there is a certain contradiction between China, its growing presence and scale of SREB projects and the Central Asian countries, which have been witnessing numerous growing risks in the process of implementation, including uncertainty about the prospects of Chinese migration. The Central Asian countries have not yet modeled the medium- and long-term implications of SREB projects and have not developed a unified position to implement their national and regional interests in the way China does in Central Asia.

The issues of labor market, unemployment, labor migration, personnel training are relevant today for all the Central Asian countries, and against this background the problems of Chinese citizens' migration, Chinese business, labor immigration have been acquiring not only economic but also social significance. Public discourse is complicated by the lack of information about Chinese migration and/or its unreliability, as well as deep-rooted sinophobia. The whole range of issues related to SREB influence on migration and policy has been poorly studied.

The purpose of this study is to determine the impact of China's "Belt and Road" Initiative and its land part, the "Silk Road Economic Belt" project, on migration flows and policies in the Central Asian countries. The tasks, inter alia, include: identification of the main types of migration that have developed in the context of PRC growing presence and SREB implementation in the region; analysis of labor migration and its impact on the labor market; study of socio-cultural types of migration – educational, tourism, their role in SREB implementation, and development prospects. Based on the analysis, recommendations are proposed. Kazakhstan is represented in the report more widely than other countries, owing to longer-term cooperation, geographical proximity and the longest borders with China.

1.3. METHODOLOGY AND INFORMATION SOURCES

The analytical report is based on desktop research. Extensive use is made of reports and statistical data of the Central Asian republics' relevant ministries: Ministry of Labor and Social Protection of Population (ML-SPP) of Kazakhstan, State Migration Service (SMS) under the Government of Kyrgyzstan, Ministry of Labor, Migration and Population Employment (MLMPE) of Tajikistan, Ministry of Employment and Labor Relations (MELR) of Uzbekistan, other ministries and agencies of the CA republics, as well as the People's Republic of China, UNDP and UN. Finally, use is made of secondary sources (data from earlier sociological surveys) and expert interviews.

CAUSES AND TRENDS OF CHINESE MIGRATION TO CENTRAL ASIA IN THE CONTEXT OF SREB IMPLEMENTATION

Today, the PRC has become one of the largest financial donors and investors in development of the transport, communications, energy (oil and gas, uranium, coal, rare earth) infrastructure in the Central Asian countries.⁹ The PRC is an important trade and economic partner and supplier of almost the entire range of consumer goods.¹⁰ Trade for 25 years has been a source of bilateral small and individual trading business and migration in countries bordering the PRC. China has also become a source of skilled labor force, which is lacking in the region.

The influence of China and SREB on migration is, to a large extent, related to the revival of the historical traditions of trade, cooperation and migration along the Silk Road. Other factors conducive to migration over a large area of modern Central Asia and the Xinjiang Uygur Autonomous Region (XUAR) in western China, formerly known as Western and Eastern Turkestan, include similarity of the language, religion, traditional lifestyle, cultural traditions, and availability of diasporas.

Migration from China has been growing since the mid-2000s, as the economic cooperation developed: there was an increase in the number of industries and sectors of the economy with a growing Chinese capital, while the range of projects also expanded; within the framework of the PRC “soft power” policy, humanitarian cooperation developed. Despite increased public attention, Chinese migration is not the largest migration flow in Central Asia. For example, about 180,000 people from the PRC arrived annually to Kazakhstan from the middle of the 2000s, which is 10–20 times less than from neighboring Kyrgyzstan, Uzbekistan and Russia.¹¹ Arrival of Kazakh nationals into China significantly exceeds the entry of foreign citizens from China into the RK (Fig. 1) due to a large share of short-term trade (“shuttle”) migrants.

Fig. 1. Border crossings between China and Kazakhstan in 2000–2017 (persons)



Sources: RK NSC (2001–2015); RK MNE (2018).

⁹ China's investment in the Central Asian republics cumulatively for 2005–2018 amounted to \$48.8 bln, of which: Kazakhstan – \$30.4 bln, Kyrgyzstan – \$4.7 bln, Tajikistan – \$1.6 bln, Turkmenistan – \$6.8 bln, Uzbekistan – \$5.2 bln (AEI, 2018).

¹⁰ According to the report of the PRC Ministry of Commerce, in 2017 China became the largest trading partner of Uzbekistan and Kyrgyzstan: trade with China amounted to \$4.961 bln or 18.4% of RU foreign trade and \$1.598 bln or 25.5% that of the KR. In 2016, the PRC was the main trading partner of Turkmenistan and the second of Kazakhstan. Although the PRC was the third largest trading partner in Tajikistan in 2017 in terms of volume, it has become the largest foreign investor. (Yang, 2018).

¹¹ RK NSC, 2011–2015; RK MNE, 2018.

In the labor markets of the Central Asian countries, one of the most acute problems is the shortage of qualified personnel that emerged in the 1990s due to massive brain drain and large-scale emigration after the collapse of the Soviet Union. Today, the labor market has great demand for highly qualified specialists and skilled workers. Therefore, attracting foreign workers, including Chinese, for construction of the SREB infrastructure facilities is a necessity.

All the CA countries have been witnessing a rapid demographic growth of the local population, with youth accounting for up to 40% or more. Due to the backlog of economic reforms and unemployment, young people leave their country to work abroad. In some countries, young people have been actively learning Chinese, seeing this as an opportunity for future employment at Chinese and joint ventures; such a “boom”, e.g., is observed in Tajikistan.¹²

Today, Chinese migration to the CA region has developed the following main trends:

- growth in the number of officially recruited Chinese labor force due to the growing number of Chinese and joint projects implemented in Central Asia; the main part of this flow is composed of ethnic Chinese (Han Chinese),
- labor immigration (hiring of labor force) and business (for the purposes of entrepreneurship) mainly composed of top- and middle-level managers, professionals and workers,
- bilateral small-scale and individual trade business and migration are declining; today they are directed towards China rather than originating from China, as they mainly consist of cross-border trips from neighboring Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan,
- permanent migration from the PRC is predominantly of ethnic nature, since it is carried out within the framework of the state policy of repatriating ethnic Kazakhs to Kazakhstan and ethnic Kyrgyz to Kyrgyzstan,
- the migration flows from the PRC are ethnically diversified, involving not only Han, but also Kazakhs, Kyrgyz, Tajiks, Uigurs, Dungans (Huizu) and others who develop small and medium businesses in the receiving countries,
- regionalization and localization of cross-border migration between China and the Central Asian countries, i.e. the main share of migration occurs not between the PRC as a whole, but between the border-adjacent Xinjiang, in particular, the areas inhabited by ethnic diasporas in the XUAR, and Central Asia. The exception is Turkmenistan, focusing on the countries to the south and west – Russia, Ukraine, etc.
- steady growth of educational migration to China in the last 5-10 years, which allows training a pool of specialists and translators to serve Chinese projects in Central Asia,
- tourism – one of the potentially large and mutually beneficial sectors of cooperation and growth in the number of bilateral and multilateral visits – is at the initial stage of development,
- China’s gradual entry into the agricultural sector of the Central Asian countries – the most sensitive area of business cooperation - and the related migration of farmers and workers into countries such as Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan,
- intensified sinophobia in some countries of the region (Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan).

¹² Sputnik, 2017.

CHINESE LABOR MIGRATION TO THE CENTRAL ASIAN COUNTRIES

3.1. FOREIGN LABOR POLICY

Chinese labor migration in the Central Asian countries includes trade migration, business migration, and hired labor force. Today, there is a steady presence of Chinese labor force and business. Chinese managers, engineering and technical personnel, other professionals and workers are employed in the PRC priority cooperation sectors in each of the countries. They work mainly for large Chinese and joint ventures, companies, contractors in the energy, construction and service sectors.

Labor immigration is regulated by national legislations, which establish specific categories of invited workers (CEOs, unit managers, specialists, skilled workers, etc.) as well as their overall numbers and timeframe for their stay in the country. To this end, in Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan and Turkmenistan, the state annually establishes a quota for attracting foreign labor force and/or regulates the ratio of local and foreign workers in enterprises.¹³ The quota is aimed at attracting the most sought-after professionals and at the same time at protecting the internal labor market. Foreign workers have the right to work temporarily: in Kazakhstan, e.g., for up to one year, with the right of extension. Highly qualified specialists, including Chinese professionals, have the opportunity to work under a contract for up to 3-5 years.¹⁴

Earlier in Uzbekistan, legal regulation was limited to organization of labor activities of Uzbek nationals abroad and foreign nationals in the RU, whereas employers had to obtain a license for using foreign labor force. In November 2018, President Sh. Mirziyoyev signed a decree on creating favorable conditions for employment of qualified foreign specialists in Uzbekistan.¹⁵ As of 1 December 2018, the requirement to obtain permits to attract foreign personnel no longer applies. They can work for up to three years with the right to an unlimited number of three-year extensions; additional benefits and preferences are offered as well.¹⁶ Turkmenistan has been developing its migration legislation, but the law on migration and its implementation do not fully meet international standards.¹⁷

Labor immigration to the Central Asian countries is also regulated by international agreements in the framework of the Eurasian Economic Union (EAEU, 2015), whose members include Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan, and the Commonwealth of Independent States (CIS, 1991), whose members include all the Central Asian countries, except for Turkmenistan. The membership of the Central Asian countries does not always coincide, which affects the migration processes and policies.

Within the framework of the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation (SCO), Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, and Uzbekistan, together with Russia, closely cooperate with China in matters of trade and economic cooperation, security and prevention of illegal migration. Apart from the SCO instruments, China primarily cooperates with the Central Asian states in a bilateral format, signing agreements to ensure security and combating the “three evils”: terrorism, separatism and extremism on the western borders of China.

In China, labor emigration and development of business abroad have a solid international legal framework developed during the formation years of China’s “Going Out” global foreign policy strategy. Implementation of SREB in Central Asia is also becoming a continuation of China’s Western Development Program, launched by the government in 2000 and aimed at turning the neighboring Xinjiang into a regional trade, economic and logistics center.

The national development programs are being gradually aligned to SREB in the process of its implementation. Hence, in 2016, Kazakhstan started “conjunction” of the state infrastructure development program “Nurly Zhol” for 2015-2020 and SREB; in 2017, Tajikistan confirmed its readiness to “connect” its National Development Strategy for 2016-2030. In May 2018, China signed a cooperation agreement with the Eurasian Economic Union, which approximates BRI projects to the EAEU development strategy. Migration issues may be discussed in the future as part of the “conjunction” policy.

¹³ The migration and labor legislation of the Central Asian republics requires a certain share of local personnel, i.e., the ratio of the national and foreign personnel. For example, in Turkmenistan, since 2003, the number of foreigners should not exceed 30% of the total number of employees; in 2018, the ratio was 10% to 90%. EC and IOM, 2005: 56; anonymous expert from Turkmenistan, Almaty, June 2018)

¹⁴ RK MFA, 2018.

¹⁵ Polpred.com, 2018.

¹⁶ Ibid.

¹⁷ Ministry of Justice of TM, 2018.

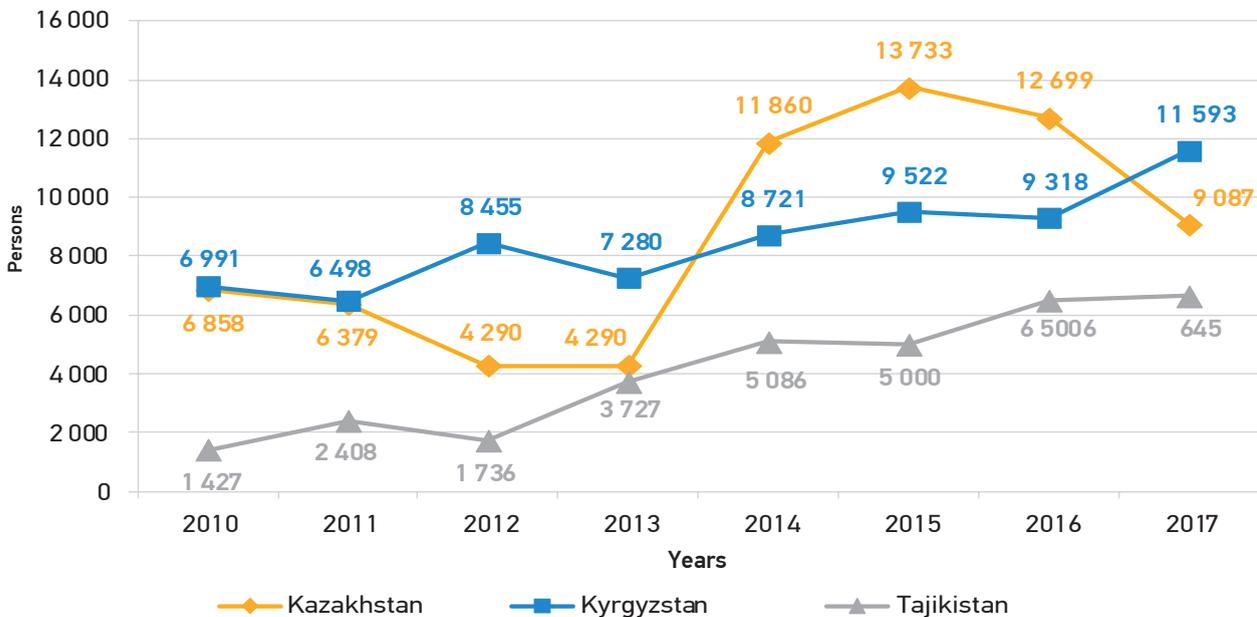
3.2. CHINESE LABOR AND BUSINESS MIGRATION

Kazakhstan has been attracting Chinese labor force under a quota since 2003. In 2017, 9,087 workers were recruited or 39.1% of the total foreign labor force (Fig. 2). Nationals of China are engaged in construction, mining and manufacturing industries, in the services sector in almost all the RK regions, primarily western (in the oil and gas sector), in Astana and Almaty.¹⁸

According to the PRC Embassy in the RK, Kazakhstan intends to implement 51 projects worth over \$27 bln within the framework of the SREB/BRI. In accordance with the Cooperation Program, 20,000 new jobs will be created in transport and logistics enterprises, oil and gas and chemical industries, construction and agriculture.¹⁹ The economic contribution of major Chinese and joint ventures is complemented by programs of corporate social responsibility (CSR) of business²⁰.

In Kyrgyzstan, in 2017, 14,768 work permits were issued to foreign specialists, including 1,017 to individual entrepreneurs.²¹ PRC nationals, as a rule, make up the majority, in 2017 – 78.5% or 11,593 specialists (Fig. 2). The predominant sectors of economy include industry, construction and transportation, energy, mining, catering and other services; there are 470 Chinese and joint ventures. The largest projects: Kyrgyz-Chinese gas pipeline in the Osh Region, Ring road in the Issyk-Kul Region, oil refinery in the Chui Region, reconstruction of a thermal power plant in Bishkek, etc.²²

Fig. 2. Chinese quota-based labor force in Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, and Tajikistan in 2010-2017 (persons)*



* In Tajikistan – the total number of foreign labor force in 2017, according to the Ministry of Labor, Migration and Population Employment of the RT

Sources: Sites of relevant ministries of the CA republics: RK MLSPP (2011-2018); KR SMS (2011-2018); RT MLMPE (2011-2018); expert interviews (2016-2018).

In Tajikistan, labor immigration of specialists and workers, according to the foreign labor force quota for 2018, amounted to 7,500 people, and this quota is mainly intended for PRC nationals.²³ (Fig. 2). At the same time, when investing in projects, Beijing makes participation of Chinese workers an imperative requirement. However, the Government of the RT also sets forth its conditions: a foreign company in exchange for one of “its” employees must provide employment to nine Tajik nationals (ibid.). The PRC nationals are engaged in industrial production, construction, trade, public catering, and agriculture.

¹⁸ RK MLSPP, 2018.

¹⁹ Zhumadilov, 2018.

²⁰ For example, the Atyrau Oil Refinery, built in Atyrau for the loans of Eximbank of China of \$1.130 bln. During periods of increased loads, the Atyrau Oil Refinery employs 700 foreign, including Chinese, specialists and four thousand local residents. 115 local youth received higher education in Chinese universities and work in Atyrau as engineers or translators (Surganov, 2017). The CSR policy is followed by the joint venture JSC CNPC-Aktobemunaigas, PetroKazakhstan, JSC Turgai Petroleum Shymkent Refinery and many others.

²¹ KR SMS, 2018.

²² Ibid.

²³ Ashurov, 2018.

Today, China is the main foreign trade partner and a major investor in the energy sector of Turkmenistan. According to official data, 1,300 Chinese and Turkmen specialists and workers participated in construction of the largest project – the Turkmenistan-China gas pipeline.²⁴ Today, 30 Chinese enterprises in the country employ about 2,000 staff.²⁵ Recently, Turkmenistan has been reported to face financial, economic and social challenges and increasing emigration. Analysts directly associate the currency crisis in TM with the fall in prices on the world oil and gas market since 2014 and excessive dependence of Turkmenistan's economy and energy sector on China, calling it "multidimensional".²⁶ The response to the crisis was a growth in labor emigration to Turkey, Russia, Ukraine and Azerbaijan. The authorities are trying to block the labor force outflow through an unofficial ban on traveling abroad for nationals under 40 years of age.²⁷

After the change of the political leader in 2016, Uzbekistan has been stepping up cooperation with China for two years. For the landlocked country, the establishment of a new interregional transport system within the framework of SREB is crucial, since it contributes to job creation and employment growth among the local population. According to official data, the unemployment rate in 2017 was 5.8%, thereby amounting to 837,000 persons.²⁸ In reality about 3 mln Uzbek nationals²⁹ work in the RF and RK, constituting 9.4% of the total population and 20.9% of the entire workforce.³⁰

In 2017, 19,749 Chinese citizens entered Uzbekistan, of which 4,257 came to work, 2,739 for business and official purposes and 3,590 for commercial purposes.³¹

According to the PRC Ambassador in the RU, as of August 2018 the country already had over 900 enterprises with Chinese capital³². Judging by the growth rate of business migration and tourism from the PRC to Uzbekistan and given the new policy of facilitating attraction of foreign staff, the RU can be predicted to witness an increase in immigration of Chinese professionals and entrepreneurs.

3.3. IMPACT OF LABOR MIGRATION FROM CHINA ON LOCAL LABOR MARKETS

The Central Asian countries are concerned about "excessive" migration from the PRC and that Chinese workers are creating "competition" in the local labor markets (Table 1). However, labor force from the PRC is employed, as a rule, in Chinese or joint ventures or on a rotational basis in remote areas in construction of gas and oil pipelines, or in a specific national business – Chinese restaurants and medical centers, which often serve PRC nationals. The share of Chinese in the total workforce of the CA countries is small. In Kazakhstan in 2017 it was 0.10%, in Kyrgyzstan – 0.49%, in Tajikistan – 0.28%, and did not significantly impact the labor market³³.

Table 1. Labor market indicators in the Central Asian countries in 2017 (thousands of people and percentage)

Country	The number of economically active population/workforce (people)	Number of employed population (people)	Employment rate (percent)	Number of unemployed (people)	Unemployment rate (percent)	Youth unemployment rate (percent)
Kazakhstan	9,027.4	8,585.2	73.7	442.3	4.9	3.8
Kyrgyzstan	2,525.2	2,351.2	59.3	174.0	7.0	14.8
Tajikistan	2,460.2	2,407.0	42	155.8*	7.0*	11.4*
Turkmenistan	2,463.6	2,218.4	...	245.2
Uzbekistan	14,357.0	13,520.0	60.2	837.0	5.8	...

* Data for 2016

Source: Interstate Statistical Committee of the CIS, (2018): 37-44.

²⁴ Sadovskaya, 2012: 49.

²⁵ Turkmeninform, 2017.

²⁶ Today, China receives more than 90% of Turkmen gas exports, while its average price fell from \$503 per ton in 2014 to \$266 in 2017. According to Chinese data, imports from TM increased in 2014-2017 by 33%, but the total revenue fell from \$9.4 bln to \$6.5 bln, or by 31%. This led to a dramatic reduction in foreign exchange earnings in Turkmenistan and led to subsequent imbalances in the financial, economic, and social sphere, up to the commodity and food deficit. (Jakobowski & Marszewski, 2018).

²⁷ Jakobowski & Marszewski, 2018.

²⁸ RU State Committee for Statistics, 2018b.

²⁹ Aqparat.info, 2018.

³⁰ Calculated by the author using the national data, see Annex 2 and Table 1.

³¹ RU State Committee for Statistics, 2018b.

³² PRC Embassy in Uzbekistan, 2018b.

³³ Calculated by the author using the labor market statistics of the CA republics and data on attracting of the Chinese labor force. (Interstate Statistical Committee of the CIS, 2017: 36-42).

Chinese enterprises sometimes get delayed with their opening and/or operation, but this is largely the receiving party's fault; several such cases were recorded in Kazakhstan.³⁴ Kyrgyz experts emphasize the economic opportunities of SREB in the KR, but also express fears about lack of "common points" between society and investors who, "pursuing their own interests ... get in conflict with the population".³⁵ The Tajik economist S. Nosirov speaks of the negative effects of Chinese presence: in his opinion, by investing in various projects in the RT, PRC simply transfers money from one of its pockets to another.³⁶ With these funds, "Chinese companies buy Chinese-made equipment and materials, ... [projects] are mainly implemented by Chinese specialists and workers. Thus, most of the allocated funds return to China. Tajikistan remains in debt, which must be repaid with interest".³⁷

As shown above, with availability of information, some fears in the host communities about "uncontrolled" labor migration from the PRC and its "pressure" on the local labor markets can be assuaged. However, many other aspects such as credit debt and financial dependence on China, issues of youth unemployment, prospects for Chinese migration, etc., ought to be studied by local experts to prevent the risk of negative development scenarios.

Illegal migration from China to the CA republics is insignificant, since the PRC government encourages Chinese entrepreneurs to strictly comply with the laws in the receiving countries. There are individual cases of illegal border crossing, but more often violations concern internal migration and labor legislation. According to the RK National Security Committee (NSC), over 400 violations of the rules of stay in Kazakhstan were recorded in 2015-2017. Some Chinese workers without qualifications provide fake higher education diplomas, false invitations and contracts to get a work permit or visa in the RK.³⁷ Corruption in the host countries creates risks linked to the presence of Chinese nationals. For instance, Kazakhstan mass media reported on illegal employment channels for Chinese nationals: two transnational criminal groups, through 85 registered Kazakh companies, organized channels of mass illegal entry from the PRC to Kazakhstan.³⁸

³⁴ For example, in Kokshetau in northern Kazakhstan the oil processing enterprise "Taiynsha May" planned to attract eleven highly qualified personnel from the PRC: director general, managing staff and engineers, and employ 60 RK nationals as workers (Surganov, 2017). However, Chinese nationals could not enter the RK because they were denied long-term working visas. None of the Kazakh workers could operate Chinese equipment, because Chinese engineers did not provide training to the local staff; a number of other technical issues were not resolved, so the plant was idle for many months. (Ibid.)

³⁵ Israilova, 2016.

³⁶ Ashurov, 2018.

³⁷ Ibid.

³⁸ RK NSC, 2018.

³⁹ Tengrinews.kz, 2018.

SOCIO-ECONOMIC MIGRATION IN THE CONTEXT OF SREB

4.1. EDUCATIONAL MIGRATION

In recent years, China has been increasing its cultural influence in Central Asia: within its “soft power” policy, the PRC has been investing in education, research, television and radio broadcasting, cultural and sports events, and exhibition activities. In the educational sphere, China has been increasing admission of CA students to its universities and colleges, sending students to study at CA universities, opening Confucius Institutes, and actively promoting learning of Chinese.

Over the past ten years, the number of CA students in China has increased dramatically. In terms of countries, Kazakhstan has the lead: since 2008, it has been among the top ten nationalities of foreign students in China (5,666 students); in 2017, their number reached 13,996.⁴⁰ According to the Ministry of Education and Science of Tajikistan, more than 3,000 Tajik students are currently studying in the PRC, and according to experts – 5,000.⁴¹ For the students of the SCO member states, China has allocated 20,000 educational quotas for five years from 2016 to 2021.⁴²

Today, the number of graduates from Chinese colleges and universities and numerous Chinese language courses at Confucius institutes and language training centers in the CA countries amounts to several thousands in Kyrgyzstan. In the near future, this number is expected to increase to tens of thousands in Kazakhstan. Hence, the PRC is preparing linguistic and technical personnel for serving on SREB projects and consistently involves CA in the orbit of its socio-economic interests.

The education received in the PRC allows replenishing the labor market of the CA countries with qualified personnel, increases competitiveness of specialists in local labor markets, and contributes to their professional and career growth as well as human capital development in general. However, attracting young people to the PRC higher education institutions creates risks of “brain drain” from CA not only to the west, but also to the east. Temporary student migration has a global tendency towards transforming into a permanent one, which creates risks of irretrievable emigration and reduction in the working-age population in the countries of origin.

4.2. TOURISM AND VISA POLICIES

Tourism has great potential in the relations between China and the Central Asian republics. According to a representative of the PRC Ministry of Culture and Tourism, with the development of the “Belt and Road” Initiative, Chinese tourists have been showing an increasing interest in Central Asia, which is located along the main route of the ancient Silk Road. According to the ministry, in 2017, 200,000 PRC nationals visited Kazakhstan. However, the quite complicated visa procedures become an obstacle to tourism development.⁴⁴

The CA countries, realizing the importance of developing tourism in the region and assessing the potential of the tourist flow from China, are taking the first steps to simplify the visa regime for PRC nationals who are holders of a regular passport. Tajikistan introduced an electronic visa in 2017; Uzbekistan introduced a simplified procedure for issuing tourist visas to PRC nationals⁴⁵ at the beginning of 2018 and an electronic visa in July of the same year. This immediately led to an increased tourist flow: within 50 days after the introduction of electronic visas, 9,073 visas were issued, with tourists from China in the lead – 2,043 visas (22.5%).⁴⁶ In 2017, Uzbekistan was visited by almost 20,000 Chinese nationals, and in the first half of 2018 – already by more than 15,000.⁴⁷

In Kyrgyzstan, on the contrary, a proposal by a local deputy to introduce a visa-free regime for tourist groups from China provoked a heated public reaction. A stand against it was taken by law enforcement agencies (they fear an influx of migrant workers under the guise of tourists and “appearance of undesirable elements”), some experts and the public.⁴⁸ According to an online survey, 77% of respondents fear that in the case of a visa-free regime, Chinese will migrate to the KR in large numbers.⁵⁰

⁴⁰ IIE, 2018.

⁴¹ Sputnik, 2017a.

⁴² PRC Embassy in Uzbekistan, 2018.

⁴³ Wang, 2018.

⁴⁴ Ibid.

⁴⁵ Yidaiyilu.gov.cn, 2018.

⁴⁶ Regnum, 2018.

⁴⁷ RU State Committee for Statistics, 2018; PRC Embassy in Uzbekistan, 2018.

⁴⁸ Kaktus.media, 2018.

⁴⁹ Ibid.

The current visa situation between Kazakhstan and China also negatively affects business cooperation and mobility. Despite the Year of Chinese Tourism in Kazakhstan in 2017, the RK limited itself to introduction of a three-day visa-free regime for tourists from the PRC for a short period from 9 June to 12 September 2017, i.e. for the period of EXPO-2017 in Astana.⁵⁰ According to official data, the number of tourists who arrived to Kazakhstan from the PRC was 94.000,⁵¹ i.e. less than in the previous years. Therefore, the potential of the tourist flow from the PRC was not used effectively.

4.3. SINOPHOBIA AS AN OBSTACLE TO ECONOMIC AND CULTURAL COOPERATION

In recent years, sinophobia has become a significant factor influencing the mobility policies and prospects in the CA countries, in particular, in Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan. Prejudices towards Chinese (Han) migration and its “mythologization” represent a specific and complex phenomenon, that is both rooted in history and contemporary, because it is based on the population’s poor knowledge of the history, culture and traditions of the Chinese people or social and political realities of the PRC. This is confirmed by representative polls in Kazakhstan, according to which only 9% of respondents are familiar with Chinese culture and traditions, 40% with the foreign policy and 49% with the economy of the neighboring country.⁵²

In addition to cases of local labor disputes in Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan, in the spring of 2016 the RK witnessed public mass protests in large cities against land lease by foreign companies, which immediately acquired anti-Chinese character.⁵³ Sinophobia increases ethnic tensions, slows down and even hinders legal reform and the implementation of projects for development of Kazakhstan’s agriculture. The lack of information regarding SREB can further exacerbate sinophobia and create risks for project implementation.

⁵⁰ [Zakon.kz](#), 2017

⁵¹ RK MNE, 2018: 12-14.

⁵² Sadovskaya, 2014: 297.

⁵³ Pannier, 2016.

MAIN FINDINGS

- ▶ Influenced by the SREB and BRI in Central Asia, migration flows between the PRC and the CA countries since launching the Initiative in 2013, predominantly have continued the trends established in the 1990s-2000s. Labor, business, trade, educational and other types of migration to CA persist, because China in the SREB framework continues the projects started earlier in the region.
- ▶ The recent trends influenced by SREB/FDI include a reduction in trade migration and an increase in hiring Chinese labor force for construction of infrastructure facilities and enterprises. Both the number and the share of Chinese workers among the recruited foreign labor force has been growing.
- ▶ A new phenomenon in the region are the migration and visa reforms introduced by Uzbekistan since 2017, in the context of the wider political and economic reform. The country has been witnessing significant changes in its legislation and institutional setup, as well as increased migration. Business migration and tourism from China to Uzbekistan has been growing rapidly. The Chinese migration to the RU was not analyzed because of the relatively small numbers in the past.
- ▶ In Turkmenistan, there is no access to migration and demographic statistics and analytics in general. Therefore, it is difficult to determine the reforms needed in the migration sphere. Information on studies assessing the impact of SREB/BRI projects on the economy and migration is not available, although the current challenging socio-economic situation in TM evidences the need to analyze the role and consequences of China's infrastructure projects in Turkmenistan.
- ▶ Educational migration to China has increased in all CA countries since the beginning of the 2010s, providing SREB with professionals and translators on-site. This positively affects the educational level of the labor force, but creates risks of "brain drain" to China and other Asia-Pacific Region countries.
- ▶ Socio-economic cooperation and exchanges ("promoting proximity between nations") are proclaimed as priorities in the BRI documents, but have not become as important in reality.
- ▶ The contribution of Chinese companies, Chinese business and labor to the economic development of CA is significant. In addition, large companies implement a CSR policy: roll out professional and vocational training, address social issues, which increases the competitiveness of enterprises and workers. To date, no comprehensive applied research on China's and the SREB impact on the development of human capital in CA has been undertaken.
- ▶ Chinese migration to CA will continue in the future, as each CA country features a number of attractive factors: natural resources, land, opportunities for employment and business development, etc. The lack of qualified personnel and workers in CA will be one of the decisive factors for Chinese labor immigration.
- ▶ Despite the increased public attention to the challenges linked to the Chinese presence, migration and prospects for its further growth of influence in CA, migration issues are neither sufficiently addressed in the SREB/FDI strategic documents nor in the actual PRC migration policy for the region, representing, apparently, a "deferred" interest for the PRC.
- ▶ Migration issues, including labor migration, migration and visa policies, labor market protection, etc., are important primarily for the CA republics and cover all the aspects, from statistics, access to information, improving legislation, and research to regional and international cooperation.

CONCLUSION

According to most global forecasts, the vectors of economic and technological development and social modernization have been shifting to Asia. China in the 21st century will play a key geopolitical role as the new center of a multi-polar world. New migration processes will take place here, differing from the ones witnessed in the 19th and 20th centuries: China will be a country of emigration, transit and increasingly also of immigration considering its aging population. The rise of China and the implementation of the SREB/FDI project will influence international policies, including migration, in the Asian and European Union (EU) countries. **This is a new challenge that international organizations specialized in migration policy should accept by including China in their work.** Since SREB connects East Asia with Europe through Central Asia, a “transfer” of migration policy expertise from the EU to Asia may be useful.

Currently, **expert and analytical cooperation** in the conceptual design of migration policies and legislation, in accordance with international standards, may in particular be beneficial for Turkmenistan and Uzbekistan.

Assisting states in their efforts to establish **institutions and mechanisms for orderly, organized and legal (labor) migration between the CA countries** may be equally important.

Operational support is required for the **prevention of illegal migration**. Moreover, **the EU should further extend the BOMCA project on border management in the CA region**, targeting specifically the joint external borders of Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan with China. This is relevant because of the political risks in the neighboring Xinjiang province and considering that a significant part of the CA republics' borders with the PRC lies in the highlands, thereby requiring additional resources.

In CA, there is a need for further **research, both applied and fundamental**, concerning all the aspects of Chinese migration, including its impacts on the CA labor markets and youth employment, economic development, socioeconomic migration and its consequences and risks, the design of migration policies, as well as the overall regional and international cooperation with the PRC.

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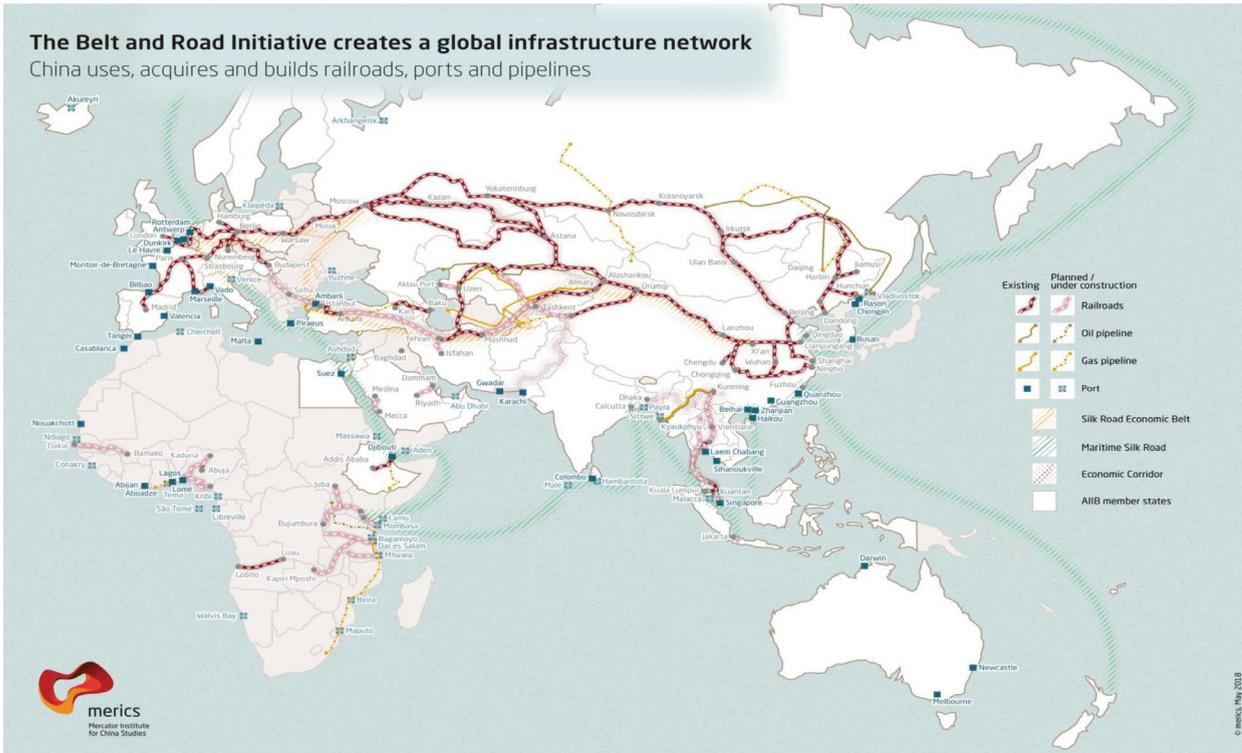
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ANNEXES

Annex 1. Map of infrastructure projects in the framework of the China “Belt and Road” Initiative

Fig. 1. Map of infrastructure projects in the framework of the China “Belt and Road” Initiative



Source: Merics.org (2018).

Annex 2. Indicators of the socio-economic and demographic development of China and Central Asian republics in 2017 (unless otherwise indicated)

Country	Population						Human development indicators						Gross domestic product (GDP)*		
	Total		Urban	Rural	Up to 5 years old	Between 15 and 64	65 and older	Median age	Place in the HDI country ranking	Human Development Index (HDI)	Life expectancy at birth	Expected training duration	Average years of training	Total GDP (nominal)	Per capita
	Mln persons	(%)	(%)	(%)	mln persons				Value	years	years	years	years	bln \$	USD
	2017b	2030b	2017	2017	2017b	2017b	2017b	2015	2017	2017	2017a	2017a	2017	2017	2017
1 China	1,409.5	1,441.2	58.0	42.0	85.1	1,010.4	150.0	37.0	86	0.752	76.4	13.8	7.8l	12 840	9 380
2 Kazakhstan	18.2	20.3	57.3	42.7	2.0	11.8	1.3	29.3	58	0.800	70.0	15.1	11.8j	128,1*	7 138*
3 Kyrgyzstan	6.0	7.0	36.1	63.9	0.8	3.8	0.3	25.3	122	0.672	71.1	13.4	10.9q	6,6*	1 133*
4 Tajikistan	8.9	11.2	27.0	73.0	1.2	5.5	0.3	22.4	127	0.650	71.2	11.2	10.4j	7,3	819
5 Turkmenistan	5.8	6.8	51.2	48.8	0.7	3.7	0.2	25.6	108	0.706	68.0	10.8	9.8q	47,9*	8 724*
6 Uzbekistan	31.9	36.7	50.6	49.4	3.2	21.6	1.4	26.3	105	0.710	71.4	12.0	11.5	48,7	1 504

a Data refer to 2017 or to the latest year for which information is available.

b Projections based on average fertility.

j Barro and Lee evaluation (2016).

l HDRO-updated based on Barro and Lee ratings (2016).

q HDRO-updated based on ICF Macro Demographic and Health Surveys for 2006-2017.

* GDP (nominal) according to the World Bank, 2018; Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan – 2016, Turkmenistan – 2015.

Sources: UNDP (2018): 22-24, 46-48; World bank (2018).

