



THE NORTHERN REGION AND THE SOUTHERN PEOPLE: MIGRATION POLICIES AND PATTERNS IN KAZAKHSTAN

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In the light of Crimea's annexation and the Donbas insurgency in eastern Ukraine, the risk of a similar irredentism scenario in the northern oblasts of Kazakhstan—which host the largest population of ethnic Russians outside Russia and Ukraine—has aroused the interest of numerous Western experts.² Some warn that such a scenario is very likely to be repeated in northern Kazakhstan, while other observers are more cautious and see no signs of a domino

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² See for instance Alexander Diener, "Assessing potential Russian irredentism and separatism in Kazakhstan's northern oblasts," *Eurasian Geography and Economics* 56, 5 (2015): 469-492, and Marlene Laruelle, "Why no Kazakh Novorossiia? Kazakhstan's Russian minority in a Post-Crimea world," *Problems of Post-Communism*, October 24, 2016. See also Samantha Brletich, "The Crimea model: Will Russia annex the Northern region of Kazakhstan?" *Modern Diplomacy Special Reports*, November 4, 2014, http://www.modern diplomacy.eu/index.php?option=com_k2&view=item&id=420:the-crimeamodel-will-russia-annex-the-northern-region-of-kazakhstan&Itemid=480; Peter Eltsov and Klaus Larres, "Putin's targets: Will eastern Ukraine and northern Kazakhstan be next?" *New Republic*, March 10, 2014, <https://newrepublic.com/article/116965/putins-next-targets-eastern-ukraine-and-northern-kazakhstan>; Joshua Kucera, "North Kazakhstan isn't the next Crimea — yet," *Aljazeera America*, June 19, 2014, <http://america.aljazeera.com/articles/2014/6/19/north-kazakhstanisntthenextcrimeaayet.html>.

effect. But no matter how the risk might be assessed, Kazakhstan's government takes the issue seriously. Rebalancing the demographic gap between northern and southern regions has been one of the most persistent goals of Kazakhstan's public policies since independence.

Several initiatives of the 1990s have been characterized³ as efforts to affect the population distribution pattern in the northern oblasts: the capital was moved from Almaty northward to Akmola (now Astana) in 1997; some oblasts were merged in 1997; and mechanisms designed to stimulate immigrants to settle in the North were embedded in the ethnic repatriation program. In the 2000s, given the favorable demographic trends—higher birth rate of ethnic Kazakhs and massive emigration of ethnic Russians—the government began to hope the demographic misbalance would solve itself with time. Nevertheless, the authorities chose to adopt a more voluntarist stance and initiated several new programs to stimulate South-to-North migration such as “Nurly Kosh” (incentives for ethnic repatriates to relocate in the North) and “Serpín” (state grants for rural youth from the South to study in the North).

With a widening gap between the fast-growing population of the predominantly ethnic Kazakh South and the shrinking population of the ethnically mixed North, the government saw migration as the solution. It has long pursued a policy of stimulating migration to the North; now after two decades, one can trace the actual scale of South-to-North migration. Has the government's policy of stimulating South-to-North migration been effective in changing the current population distribution pattern of northern Kazakhstan? The analysis of internal migration geography presented below provides evidence-based that this policy mostly failed.

Here I define as “northern oblasts” those whose share of ethnic Russians is still very important: Akmola (36%),⁴ Karagandy (40%), Kostanay (43%), Pavlodar (39%), North Kazakhstan (50%), and East Kazakhstan (40%). I define the South as four southern oblasts: Almaty, Kyzylorda, South Kazakhstan, and Zhambyl. I define as West four western oblasts: Aktobe, Atyrau, Mangystau, and West Kazakhstan.

The demographic gap between southern and northern Kazakhstan

The overall pattern of internal migration in Kazakhstan is shaped by two broad trends. The first one is the ongoing migration of the rural population to urban areas; the second one is migration from the provinces to the two capital cities of Almaty and Astana. These two trends have a sequence in their interrelation—the second one is a product of the first.

The first half of the twentieth century was a demographic disaster for the Kazakh population, with repeated famines and massive emigration. That turmoil, combined with significant immigration flows from the European parts of the USSR, including the last one during the giant

³ Paul Goble, “Astana shifting ethnic Kazakhs to northern Kazakhstan to block any Russian threat,” *The Interpreter*, April 4, 2014, <http://www.interpretermag.com/astana-shifting-ethnic-kazakhs-to-northern-kazakhstan-to-block-any-russian-threat/>.

⁴ Ministry of National Economy of the Republic of Kazakhstan Committee on Statistics, *Itogi Natsional'noi Perepisi Naseleniia Respubliki Kazakhstan 2009 goda. Naselenie Respubliki Kazakhstan* (Astana, 2011), http://stat.gov.kz/faces/wcnav_externalId/p_perepis?_afzLoop=13883079216344535#%40%3F_afzLoop%3D13883079216344535%26_adf.ctrl-state%3Dqaxmvhipo_62.

Virgin Lands Campaign of the 1950s, caused ethnic Kazakhs to become a minority constituting of only 30% of the population of their titular republic.⁵ In the 1950s the population of ethnic Kazakhs was smaller than at the end of the nineteenth century.⁶ The decades after the Second World War also featured intensive industrialization of the Kazakh Republic and therefore mass urbanization.

In terms of ethnic composition, that urban expansion was overwhelmingly non-Kazakh, dominated by Russian, Ukrainian, German, and other so-called European populations. In the 1970s, only 17% of the republic's urban population was ethnically Kazakh. In the northern oblasts of Kostanay and North Kazakhstan, their share was even smaller—6% and 8% respectively. That population distribution pattern extended across the southern region as well: 15% of urban population was ethnically Kazakh in Almaty oblast, 18% in Zhambyl oblast, and 26% in South Kazakhstan oblast. The only exceptions were the least industrialized cities, like Atyrau and Kyzylorda, the only ones with a Kazakh majority, 56% and 51% respectively. In 1970, two-thirds of ethnic Kazakhs were still rural, but an exodus toward the cities became an increasingly visible trend in the 1970s and 1980s.⁷

Although both major ethnic groups, Kazakhs and Russians, drifted on that urbanization wave, the trend was more intensive among ethnic Kazakhs: more than a fourfold growth of the ethnic Kazakh urban population took place in less than forty years. Only 1.1 million ethnic Kazakhs lived in urban settlements in 1970; in 2009 the figure was 4.8 million.⁸ That shift could hardly be the result of natural increase; rather, it was a sheer rural-to-urban migration effect. Later it was identified as a turning point for the nation: ethnic Kazakhs had never been an urbanized society before.⁹ It went in parallel with another trend, that of the departure of so-called European population, slowly in the 1970s-1980s and at an accelerated pace in the 1990s. Between the 1989 and 2009 censuses, the population of ethnic Russians living in Kazakhstan decreased by 40%, Ukrainians by over 60%, and Germans by over 80%.¹⁰ The rural exodus of ethnic Kazakhs thus also became a replacement strategy for urban population.

In today's Kazakhstan, differences between the regions' demography is a tangible fact; populations of the southern and the western oblasts are almost entirely Kazakh, while the northern oblasts have a bipolar composition, with close shares of the two largest ethnic groups. Roughly, what used to be a line between Kazakh rural and Russian urban settlement areas has now become a line between the Kazakh South and the semi-Kazakh North.

Given different reproduction patterns, southern and northern oblasts also display different demographic dynamics: increasing in the South and decreasing in the North (see Map 1). Rural ethnic Kazakhs of the South and the West have a significantly higher birth rate than Russians,

⁵ Aleksandr Alekseenko, "Etnodemograficheskie evoliutsii i problema formirovaniia suverennogo sotsiokul'turnogo prostranstva Respubliki Kazakhstan," *Sotsial'nyi protret sovremennogo kazakhstanskogo obshchestva. Sbornik statei* (Astana-Almaty, 2015), 25-50.

⁶ Ibid.

⁷ Committee on Statistics, *Itogi Natsional'noi Perepisi Naseleniia Respubliki Kazakhstan 2009 goda*.

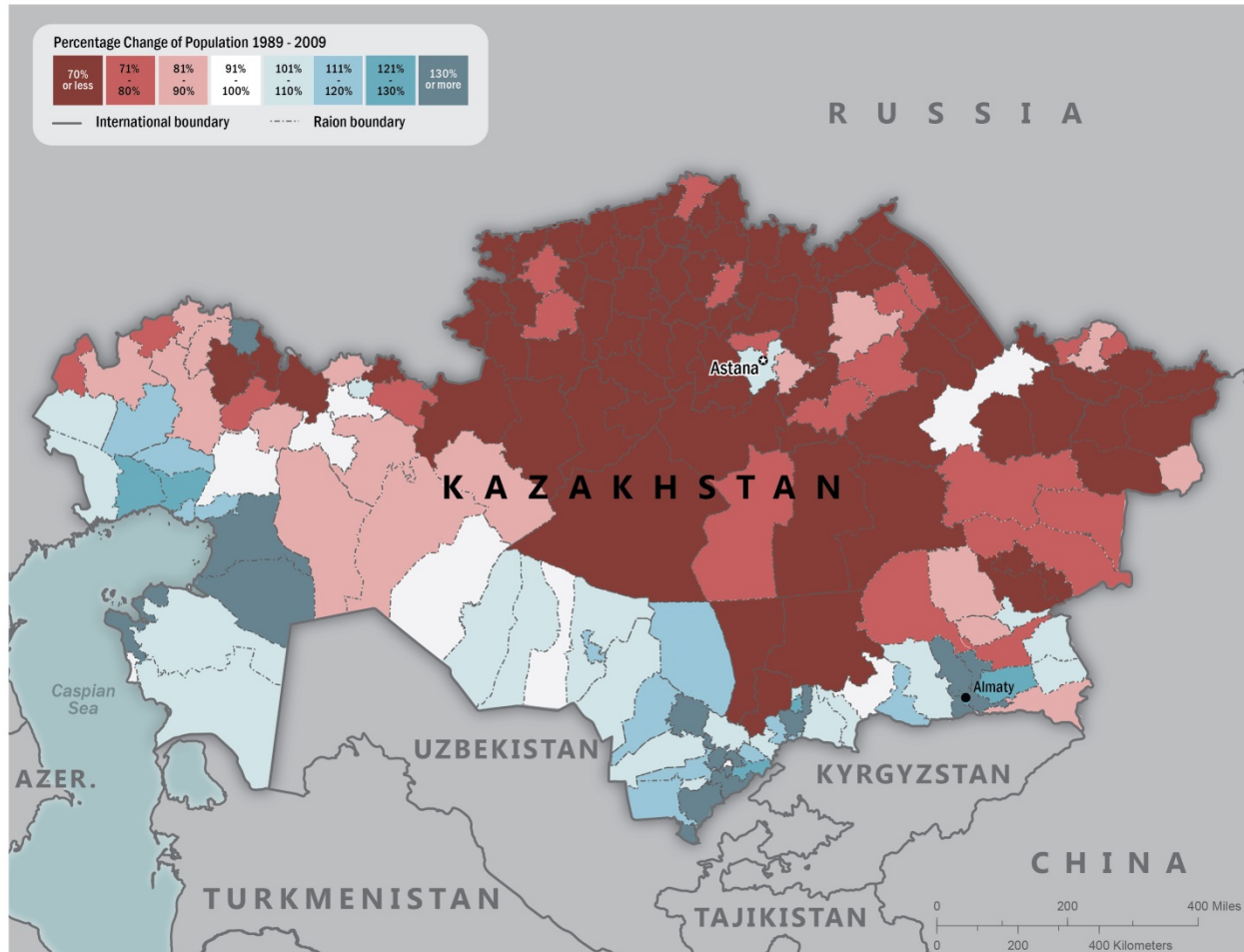
⁸ Ibid.

⁹ Nursultan Nazarbayev, "V kazhdom serdtse – rodnaia strana: rech na 12-i sessii Assamblei naroda Kazakhstana," *Kazakstanskaia pravda*, October 25, 2006.

¹⁰ Committee on Statistics, *Itogi Natsional'noi Perepisi Naseleniia Respubliki Kazakhstan 2009 goda*.

urban Kazakhs, or rural Kazakhs of the North. For example, the total fertility rate in Mangystau oblast (where 88% of the population are ethnic Kazakhs) is 3.75, whereas in North Kazakhstan oblast (where 33% of population are ethnic Kazakhs) it is 2.07; within Mangystau oblast, this index is different in rural and urban areas—4.11 and 3.35 respectively.¹¹ The smaller share of rural population in Karaganda, Pavlodar, and East Kazakhstan oblasts means a lower birth rate. All the lowest values of the birth rate index belong to the northern oblasts; they all occupy the bottom of the ranking. All of the southern oblasts have twofold higher birth rate (between 3.15 and 3.84 in 2014) than the lowest one—Kostanay index (1.76 in 2014).

Map 1. Population change 1989-2009



Source: Based on census data from the Committee on Statistics of the Republic of Kazakhstan

This high natality makes southern villages the main engine of the country's demographic growth. More than 20% of the overall rural population lives in South Kazakhstan oblast alone; about 19% live in Almaty oblast. These two southern oblasts constitute almost 40% of the whole rural population of Kazakhstan. All four southern oblasts, including Zhambyl and Kyzylorda,

¹¹ Ministry of National Economy of the Republic of Kazakhstan Committee on Statistics, *Koeffitsienty rozhdaemosti po vozrastym gruppam za 2015 god*, http://stat.gov.kz/faces/wcnav_externalId/homeNumbersPopulation?_afLoop=13886677826592193#%40%3F_afLoop%3D13886677826592193%26_adf.ctrl-state%3Dpw8yhswoh_50.

make up more than half (about 53%) of the country's rural population. Meanwhile, the northern oblasts are facing progressive depopulation. All six northern oblasts together lost 25% of their population between the 1989 and 2009 censuses, dropping from 7.7 to 5.7 million, which is less than it was in 1970. Such massive loss is visible: many villages have been abandoned; 298 villages ceased to exist in East Kazakhstan oblast during the 15-year period between the mid-1990s and the late-2000s; there were 168 such cases in North Kazakhstan oblast during the same period.¹²

Rural-urban patterns: the South and the North

Kazakhstan's statistics give no detailed information on the numbers of people who moved in particular rural-to-urban and reverse directions, so we only can use data on the internal migration balance for the two (urban/rural) types of settlements. But the data collected do allow us to measure migration flows by the type of administrative border that was crossed—that is, regional (within oblast borders) or inter-regional (beyond oblast borders) migration.

The number of people who migrate *within* the country's borders has been growing since late 1990s. The annual turnover of internal migration increased more than 2.5 times between 1999 and 2015. Both regional and inter-regional migrations have been growing at a similar pace. The regional migration balance was positive for urban areas and thereafter negative for rural settlements in all oblasts, with only one exception—the Mangystau one, where regional migration has a negative balance for urban areas since 2007. Dynamics of the rural-urban balance varied significantly over the regions. It was steadily positive with higher magnitude for urban areas in all the northern oblasts, while it was shifting and unstable in most of the southern and western ones. For example, the balance was negative for urban areas in the South Kazakhstan, Kyzylorda, Mangystau, and Atyrau oblasts in some years before the mid-2000s.

The inter-regional migration balance is negative for both urban and rural areas in almost all the regions, except the cities of Almaty and Astana; this means that these two cities are exclusive recipients of inter-regional migration. But the magnitude of inter-regional migration differs; it is smaller in the northern oblasts and larger in the southern ones. Internal migration in the North rarely goes beyond oblast borders: regional rural-urban migration dominates while the significance of inter-regional migration is low. It is somewhat opposite in the southern oblasts, where regional rural-urban migration flows vary (with sometimes a negative balance for urban settlements) and inter-regional migration has a stable negative balance for both rural and urban populations. For instance, the number of people who left Zhambyl oblast for other regions was much larger than the number who left Pavlodar oblast.

It seems therefore that the rural population in the North is steadily flowing toward cities; most move within their oblast; while in the South, not only regional rural-urban flow, but regional rural-rural, inter-regional rural-urban, and inter-regional urban-urban flows are significant. Roughly speaking, the geographical scope of internal migration destinations is much wider for southerners, both rural and urban.

¹² Pravitel'stvo Respubliki Kazakhstan, "Ob utverzhdenii osnovnykh polozhenii General'noi skhemy organizatsii territorii Respubliki Kazakhstan," December 30, 2013, #1334.

These diverging migration patterns lead to different consequences. In the North, the effective rural-urban flow leaves villages and small towns in desolation, hastening the decline of the population's reproduction base: rural families. In the South, the rural population keeps growing despite regional and inter-regional migration loss. Intensive rural-rural migration in the South means that villagers may move to a better place while at the same time maintaining their traditional reproduction type unchanged. Thus, the reproduction rate stays high despite the negative migration balance. As a result, population size in many rural settlements of the South exceeds that of some small towns in the North. There are at least 21 villages in South Kazakhstan oblast where the population size is larger than that of some towns in North Kazakhstan oblast (see Map 2).

Map 2. Rural settlements with population over 1000 inhabitants



Source: Author's calculation, data from the Committee on Statistics.

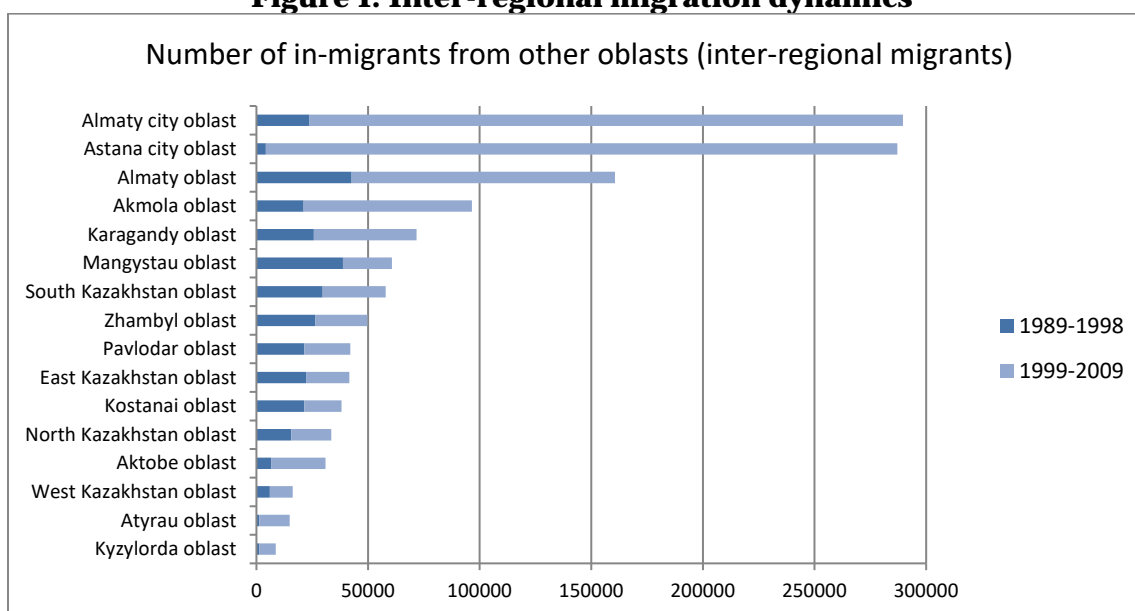
Since the early 2000s, migration from rural settlements directly to the capital cities has been increasing; skipping the intermediate stage of oblast centers was a new feature of the flow. This shift in pattern can explain the sharp increase of the numbers of in-migrants settled in Astana and Almaty. The massive migration to the capital cities is a relatively recent movement

compared to the mostly regional rural-urban trend. According to the last census data, inter-regional migration made up 41% of all internal movement during the 1999-2009 decade.¹³

Province-capital pattern: the South and North

Inter-regional migration has been growing rapidly during the last ten to fifteen years, as clearly reflected in the last two censuses. Over 308,000 people migrated inter-regionally between 1989 and 1999, but then their number soared to 991,000 during the 1999-2009 period (see Figure 1). This threefold growth in ten years was heavily driven by some regions. The capital cities attract many more people than any others. The number of inter-regional migrants in Astana increased 66 times; in Almaty their number increased 11 times. Meanwhile, it was decreasing in Mangystau, Kostanay, East Kazakhstan, Pavlodar, Zhambyl, and South Kazakhstan oblasts.

Figure 1. Inter-regional migration dynamics



Source: Author's calculation, census data from the Committee on Statistics

The estimated aggregate share of the two cities—Almaty and Astana—constitutes about 65% of overall inter-regional migration. In 2009, 70% of the residents of the capital city were migrants (not born in Astana), and 53% of its population settled there during the 1999-2009 period.¹⁴ The population of Astana city almost tripled (a 206% growth), from 281,000 people in 1989 to 863,000 in 2015.¹⁵ Almaty is the largest urban area in Kazakhstan; its population grew from 1.07 in 1989 to 1.67 million in 2015. According to the last census, 51% of the city's population was not native (not born in Almaty), and 29% of the population migrated to the city during the decade 1999-2009.

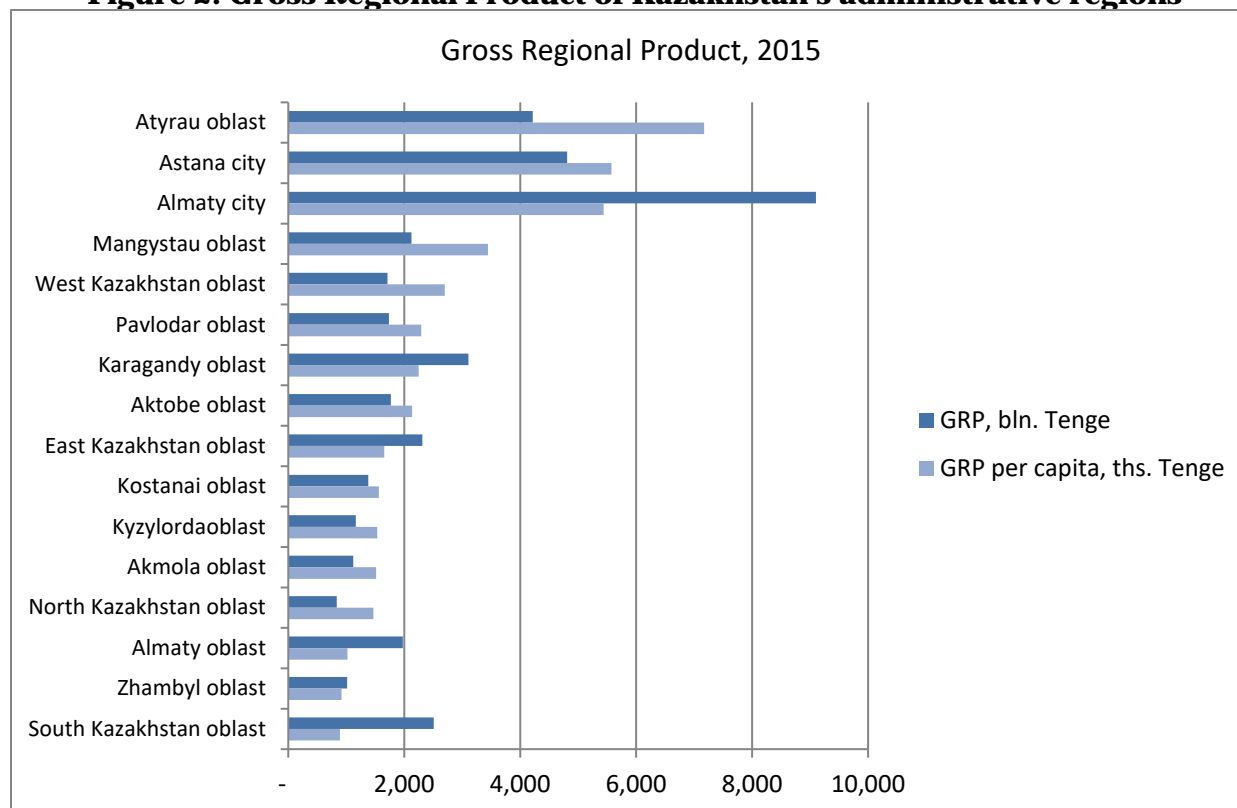
¹³ Committee on Statistics, *Itogi Natsional'noi Perepisi Naseleniia Respubliki Kazakhstan 2009 goda*.

¹⁴ Ibid.

¹⁵ Ministry of National Economy of the Republic of Kazakhstan Committee on Statistics, *Demograficheskii ezhegodnik Kazakhstana, 2015* (Astana, 2015), http://stat.gov.kz/faces/wcnav_externalId/publicationsCompilations?_afLoop=13889162624203738#%40%3F_afLoop%3D13889162624203738%26_adf.ctrl-state%3D12pmag2wra_38.

A direct relation between a region's economy and its attractiveness as a migration destination can be seen in the statistics. There are four regions with a consistently positive inter-regional migration balance: Almaty city, Astana city, Atyrau oblast, and Mangystau oblast.¹⁶ The former two are the largest fast-developing cities and the latter two are the regions where the major oilfields are located. All of them are the leading regions in terms of the Gross Regional Product per capita index (see Figure 2).

Figure 2. Gross Regional Product of Kazakhstan's administrative regions



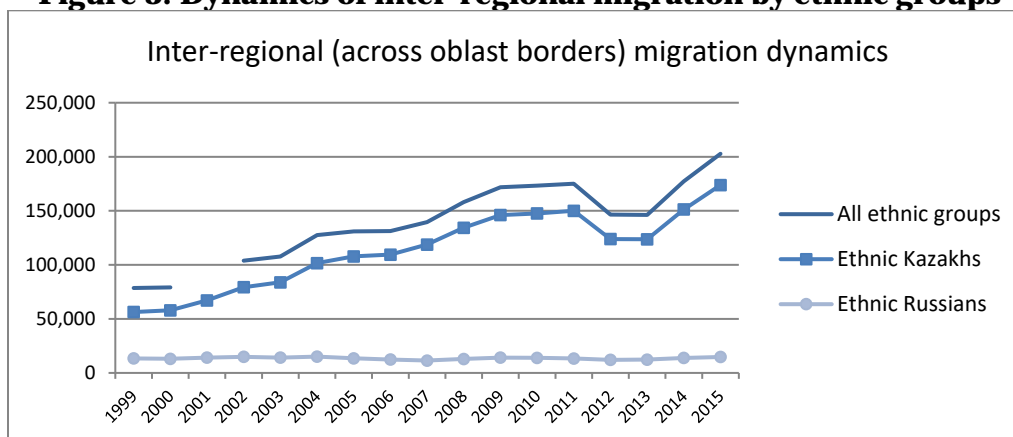
Source: Author's calculation, data from the Committee on Statistics

Economic gap and demographics can give a general answer to the question of why the South has so many more internal migrants than the North: the South has lower economic development indexes and the age structure of its population is favorable for migration. But there is also another decisive factor, one of a more cultural nature: ethnic identity. Looking more closely at the structure of internal migration, one can see that it is only Kazakhs that determine its magnitude and dynamics (see Figure 3). The number of Russians who migrated inter-regionally within Kazakhstan never exceeded 15,000 people per year; there were 13,400 Russians among the 80,000 people of the overall inter-regional migration turnover in 1999 and 14,800 Russians among the 202,800 people who migrated in 2015.¹⁷

¹⁶ Ministry of National Economy of the Republic of Kazakhstan, Committee on Statistics, *Itogi migratsii naselenia Respubliki Kazakhstan za 2015 god* (Astana, 2016). See all bulletins for the 1999-2015 period. http://stat.gov.kz/faces/wcnav_externalId/homeNumbersPopulation?_afzLoop=13889536612055585#%40%3F_afzLoop%3D13889536612055585%26_adf.ctrl-state%3D12pmag2wra_140.

¹⁷ Ibid.

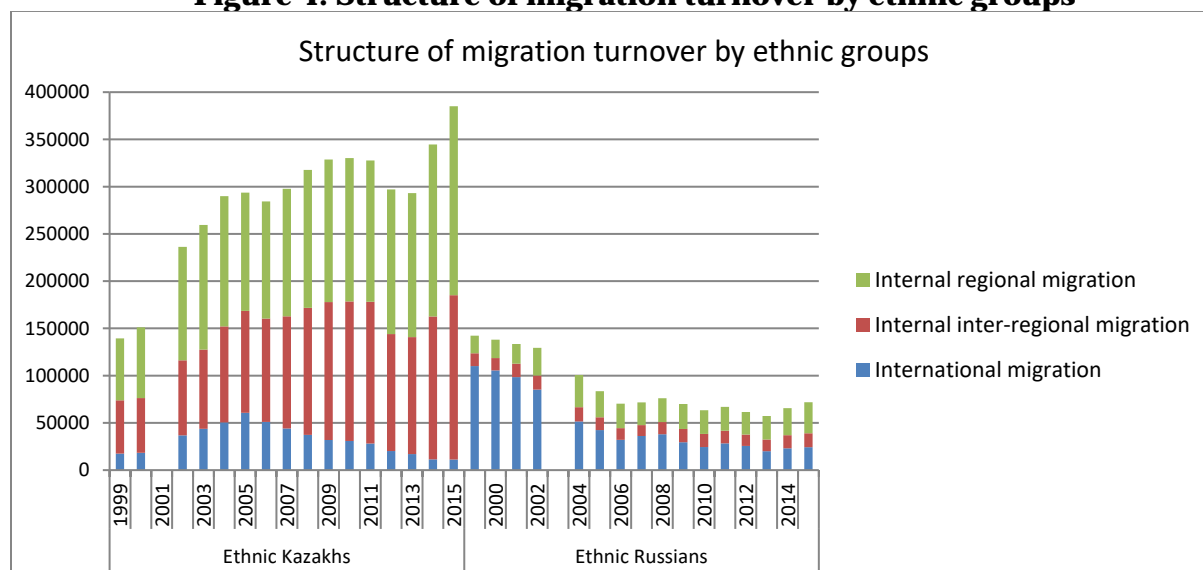
Figure 3. Dynamics of inter-regional migration by ethnic groups



Source: Author's calculation, census data from the Committee on Statistics

This is not only because fewer ethnic Russians migrate, but also because they realize their migration potential through external migration; those who plan to move outside their oblast prefer to move abroad (see Figure 4). Even in 2015, when emigration seemed exhausted, 34% of ethnic Russians who migrated did so across the country's borders, moving to neighboring regions of Russian Siberia.

Figure 4. Structure of migration turnover by ethnic groups



Source: Author's calculations, census data from the Committee on Statistics

Given the prevailing reluctance of ethnic Russians to move within Kazakhstan, internal migration is determined by the Kazakh ethnic group alone. Still, the northern region constitutes one-third of all inter-regional migration—33% of all inter-regional migrants in 1999-2015. Migrants from the six northern oblasts move mostly within the North: 69% migrated to northern settlements—47% of them to Astana city and surrounding Akmola oblast. Only about

2% moved to the western oblasts, 5% to southern ones (excluding Almaty city and Almaty oblast), and 24% to Almaty city and Almaty oblast (see Map 3).

About 40% of all inter-regional migrants during 1999-2015 came from the southern oblasts: 67% of the southerners migrated within the South—56% to Almaty city (47%) and surrounding Almaty oblast (9%), and 11% to other southern oblasts; 14% of them moved to Astana city and surrounding Akmola oblast, and 10% to other northern oblasts; and 8% to the West.

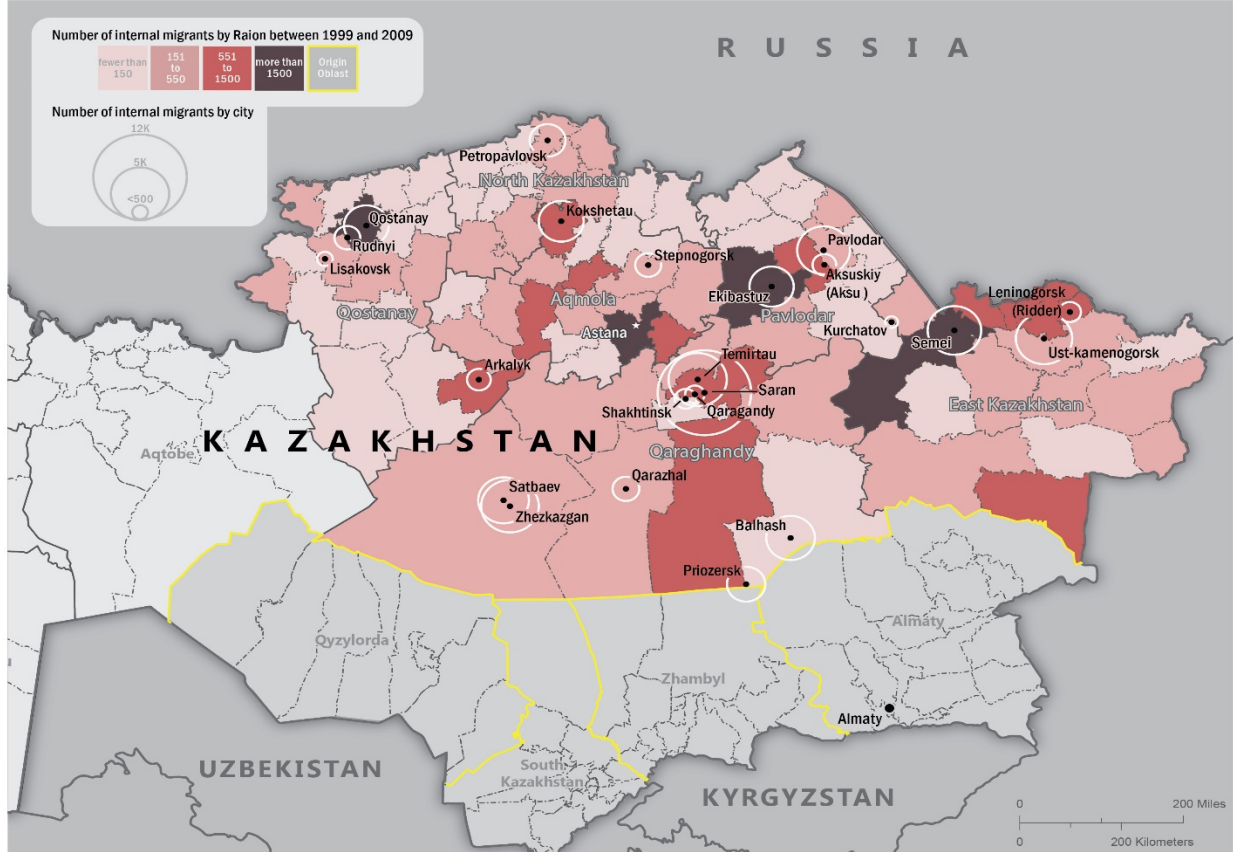
Map 3. Migration across oblast borders



Source: Author's calculations, census data from the Committee on Statistics

The northern region itself is diverse, and migrants from the South are not evenly distributed among the northern oblasts. The northernmost oblasts—Kostanay, North Kazakhstan, and Pavlodar—are the least attractive, with less than 1% migrants from the South. An overwhelming majority (8% out of 10%) of ethnic Kazakh migrants moved to the nearby Karaganda and East Kazakhstan oblasts. Flows to the farthest oblasts of the North look therefore microscopic (see Map 4). For example, during the whole period between 1999 and 2015, only about 1,400 out of 278,000 ethnic Kazakh inter-regional migrants from Almaty oblast moved to North Kazakhstan oblast. Only 2,600 out of 244,000 migrants from South Kazakhstan oblast moved to Kostanay during the same period. Flows from less populated Kyzylorda and Zhambyl oblasts are even smaller.

Map 4.
Breakdown of migrants from the southern oblasts between 1999 and 2015



Source: Author's calculations, Committee on Statistics of Republic of Kazakhstan

One can identify the three most common flows for the population of the southern oblasts: to rural centers of gravity within oblast borders, to the main cities of the oblasts (oblast centers), and to the capital cities (Almaty and Astana). Astana, together with the nearby Karaganda and East Kazakhstan oblasts, takes a major share of those who migrate to the North.

Inter-regional (across oblast borders) migration in Kazakhstan is thus heavily affected by the implications of Kazakhstan's geography: large differences in climate, culture, and economic opportunities partly shape migration flows. Migration flows remain localized mostly within the regions—the North, the South, and the West. The best illustration is the two capitals: Astana receives many more internal migrants from the northern oblasts, and Almaty from the southern ones; they both receive few in-migrants from the western region lying equally far from both of them.

The South-to-North migration policy record

The problem of population distribution in the North being a considerable concern for the Kazakh government, several voluntarist state-sponsored measures have been taken since the country's independence, such as setting quotas for the northern territories within the state program for repatriation of ethnic Kazakhs; the "Nurly Kosh" program of resettlement with

incentives for repatriates and those citizens dwelling in “unfavorable”¹⁸ territories; and “Serpin” state education grants for rural youth to go to study in the North.

With about 1 million ethnic Kazakhs repatriated from abroad since 1991, the state’s repatriation program has become one of the most remarkable initiatives of the government. Over 970,000 ethnic Kazakh repatriates [Oralmans] have entered the country since 1991: 62% of them came from Uzbekistan, 12% from China, 12% from Mongolia, 7% from Turkmenistan, 4% from Russia, and another 3-4% from other countries.¹⁹ The repatriation program aims both at showing Kazakhstan to be the ethnic homeland of all Kazakhs and at rebalancing demographic patterns in favor of Kazakhs in the northern oblasts and compensating for emigration loss. However, the policy of resettling people specifically in the northern oblasts did not work.

Official reports recognize that despite quotas (exaggerated for the northern region) and incentives (offered housing), an overwhelming majority of repatriates still preferred the southern oblasts for settlement.²⁰ Most of the repatriating ethnic Kazakhs came from the countries lying to the south of Kazakhstan (Uzbekistan, Turkmenistan, China, Afghanistan) and a vast majority of them preferred to settle in oblasts with a relatively similar geography and climatic conditions. Even among those who initially settled in the North, many migrated subsequently to the South; that movement is termed “secondary migration” (*vtorichnaia migratsiia*) in official reports.

The reliability of information on the numbers and distribution of Oralmans provided by government bodies has been questioned.²¹ For the purposes of this paper we prefer to use data from the last census, which gives us an understanding of regions that ethnic Kazakh immigrants preferred most. According to the census, 449,000 ethnic repatriates migrated and settled in Kazakhstan during the 1999-2009 period: 49% of them settled in the southern oblasts, 25% in the western ones, 19% in the northern ones, and the remaining 7% in Astana and Almaty.

The distribution of ethnic Kazakh repatriates is therefore very similar to that of internal migrants: southerners rarely go to the North. This is partly understandable, as the largest share of ethnic repatriates is coming from Uzbekistan and they prefer to settle in neighboring oblasts. Of all those who repatriated from Uzbekistan between 1999 and 2009, 62% settled in the southern oblasts, 21% in western ones, and only 13% in the northern region. The share of those who settled the southern region is similarly larger among repatriates from China (58%), Tajikistan (77%), Kyrgyzstan (58%), Afghanistan (85%), and Iran (44%). Geographical proximity thus seems to play a role in the decision to resettle; indeed, 86% of immigrants from Turkmenistan settled in western Mangystau oblast, the one closest to them. The northern

¹⁸ “Ratsional’noe rasselenie i sodeistvie v obustroistve: etnicheskim emigrantam; byvshim grazhdanam Kazakhstana, pribyvshchim dlia osushchestvleniia trudovoi deiatel’nosti na territorii Respubliki Kazakhstan; grazhdanam Kazakhstana, prozhivaiushchim v neblagopoluchnykh raionakh strany” (from the “Nyrly Kosh” program’s passport).

¹⁹ Ministerstvo zdravookhraneniia i sotsial’nogo razvitiia, “Informatsiia po etnicheskoi migratsii,” August 16, 2016, <http://www.mzsr.gov.kz/ru/node/338787>.

²⁰ Komissiia po pravam cheloveka pri Prezidente Respubliki Kazakhstan, pod obshchei redaktsiei Kuanysha Sultanova, Tastemira Abisheva, *Spetsial’nyi doklad “O situatsii s pravami oralmanov, lits bez grazhdanstva i bezhentsv v Respublike Kazakhstan”* (Astana, 2012).

²¹ <http://rus.azattyq.org/a/kazakhstan-interview-with-bodaukhan-on-repatriants/25090530.html>.

oblasts are attractive only for those coming from neighboring Russia and Mongolia: 44% of the former settled in the North, mostly in Pavlodar (13%), Kostanay (11%), and North Kazakhstan (10%) oblasts. Of the ethnic Kazakh immigrants from Mongolia, 73% settled in the northern oblasts.²²

Although on the whole, the ethnic repatriation program is seen to be successful, the directed geographical distribution of Oralman in prioritized areas failed.²³ The government has not abandoned this voluntarist policy and continues to try to channel repatriates to the North by a system of quotas and incentives, now complemented with restrictions and limitations.²⁴ For instance, the “Nurly Kosh” program, active from 2009 to 2011, was designed to stimulate the migration of ethnic repatriates and people living in “unfavorable” territories (*neblagopoluchnye raiony*) and to settle them in regions of the state’s economic priorities (*rasseleniia ... v sootvetstviu s potrebnostiami ekonomiki v trudovykh resursakh i dlia realizatsii proryvnykh proektov*).²⁵ It proposed impressive incentives such as preferential loans for housing and assistance with employment. But it was unsuccessful even at the pilot stage and was rapidly stopped.

Another state program, “Serpín,” launched in 2015, pushes rural youth from the southern oblasts to pursue higher and vocational education at universities and schools located in the northern and some western cities and towns. Only youth from five oblasts can apply for the grants. Four of them are in the South (Almaty, Zhambyl, South Kazakhstan, and Kyzylorda oblasts) and the fifth is a western one (Mangystau oblast); all of them are known for their predominantly ethnic Kazakh population, with a large share of rural population and therefore the highest birth rates. Over 11,000 grants were provided in 2014-2016.²⁶ Implementers of the program hope that most of the youth will find jobs after finishing their studies and settle in the North. However, the success of this initiative is questionable since it is not clear what advantages the new graduates will have on the local labor market.

The government’s efforts to shift the population distribution pattern in the northern oblasts do not yet have any examples of success. This may be understandable given that northern Kazakhstan is part of a larger geographical macro-region—Siberia—with a specific climate, culture, and economic features that are rather different from the rest of Kazakhstan. Russia itself faces the impossibility of maintaining its own population in Siberian cities, especially in the most northern or far-eastern ones; the policies of managed migrations that were possible during Soviet times cannot be implemented now in another economic and political context. Despite the Russian government’s efforts to reverse the negative trend, the outflow of population from Siberia in the direction of more welcoming European regions of the country continues to this day.

²² Committee on Statistics, *Itogi Natsional’noi Perepisi Naseleniia Respubliki Kazakhstan 2009 goda*.

²³ Komissiiia po pravam cheloveka, *Spetsial’nyi doklad*.

²⁴ <http://www.rikatv.kz/evrika/region/shlagbaum-dlya-oralmana.html>.

²⁵ <https://www.zakon.kz/130010-nurly-kosh-programma-dejstvii.html>.

²⁶ http://www.serpín.kz/?page_id=26.

Conclusion and recommendations

Mapping of internal migration in Kazakhstan shows that movement beyond oblast borders is heavily shaped by distances and by the existence of strong regional identities. Southerners primarily move within the southern region; likewise, northerners prefer to stay in the northern one. The northernmost areas—Kostanay, North Kazakhstan, and Pavlodar oblasts—do not attract any significant numbers of migrants that could shift the population distribution pattern; this area seems destined to slowly depopulate and remain economically oriented toward Russia's Siberian cities—Omsk, Chelyabinsk, and Yekaterinburg. Astana is the only northern city that receives large flows of migrants from the South. The promising example of large internal migration to Astana city should not be misunderstood, however: those hundreds of thousands who migrated to the new capital did so without any state stimuli or channeling; it was a natural movement toward one of the most prosperous cities of the country in search of a better life and a symbolic lift on the social ladder. No other northern city can compete with Astana in terms of economic and symbolic attraction.

Massive migration from the South to the territories bordering the Russian Federation remains a matter of wishful thinking on the part of the state and does not match up with the current internal migration patterns. The migration behavior of ethnic repatriates demonstrates without ambiguity that even solid incentives like housing and social benefits are not enough to make people settle in territories of state priority. Only job markets and a feeling of cultural belonging to a certain region seem to drive migration flows. It would therefore be beneficial for the Kazakhstani government to take into consideration the previous failures in trying to manage migration flows and orient itself toward new policies that would target improving the job market in every region and reducing economic inequalities between regions. The potential risk of irredentism coming from the Russian-dominated northern oblasts should be addressed by other means than the failed hope of a targeted migration of ethnic Kazakhs. In any case, the demographic evolution of Kazakhstan plays in favor of the Kazakh majority and not in favor of the Russian minority. Yet, the issue of strong regional identities, with Kazakhstan's territory divided into three big regions—North, South, and West—with strong local identities, will have to be addressed in the future.