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**SOCIAL RISKS AND VULNERABILITY OF LABOR MIGRANTS**  
**IN THE RUSSIAN BORDERLAND**

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*Abstract*

International migration has a significant effect on demographics, economics and ethnocultural life of Russia. Throughout the last decade, its population has been augmented by about 2.5 million of officially documented international migrants and a significant number of illegal foreign workers, which main streams come from CIS countries and Central Asia. The State migration policy aimed to promote transparency in registration and adaptation of newcomers but they remain very susceptible to risks of discrimination, social exclusion and xenophobia. The sociological survey was conducted in 2017 in Asian borderland (the Altai territory) to investigate different aspects of international migration in Russia in conjunction with security and social integration. The methodology included interviews with population (n=932, aged from 18 to 70 years) and labour migrants (n=317, aged from 16 to 73 years). Despite high degree of consent that international migration meets the demand of economy in low-qualified labour force and that migrants deserve humane treatment, the results show that population's views about migration are often biased and politicized: over a third part of respondents think that migrants threaten national security, associate migration with growing insecurity, increase in disease and blurring of traditional Russian culture. Migrants, in contrast, are rarely opposed to "natives", they are satisfied with conditions of their life in Russia, 88% of them report that they had never faced hostility or aggression. Meanwhile, considering low level of trust towards social institutions and significant role of social networks in accessing social services, the authors conclude about latent character of migrants' vulnerability.

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**Keywords:** International migration, labour migrants, Russian borderland, social risks, vulnerability.



## 1. Introduction

Immigration to Russia is an inevitable long-term trend, determined by objective prerequisites (Ivanov, 2011; Belyaev, 2017; Ryazantsev, Bogdanov & Khramova, 2017). With a foreign-born population approaching 9 %, Russia has the second-largest stock of migrants in the world after the USA (Heleniak, 2016). Over the past fifteen years, the presence in Russia of several million labour migrants from Central Asia has been a key determinant of the region's stability (Lang, 2017). Official statistical data of the Ministry of Internal Affairs indicate persistent and increasing migration inflows, only in 2017 attaining about 15 million of people. The main stream consists of citizens from countries-members of the CIS (67.9%) that is largely due to Eurasian integration process, especially to the appearance of Eurasian economic union in 2015, embracing five countries (Russia, Kazakhstan, Belarus, Armenia and Kyrgyzstan), showing much interest in common economic and politic space and oriented toward liberal, free from administrative barriers relations at the labour markets. The major part (52.4%) of migrants are citizens of Ukraine, Uzbekistan, Kazakhstan and China. Every year over 200 thousand of foreign citizens require and receive Russian citizenship and about 300 thousand obtain permits for temporary residence, over 130 thousand of labour migrants gain work permits and about 1.5 million (2017, 1.4 million in 2016) receive work patents.

The recent political decisions of the Russian government in the field of regulation of international migration are aimed to enhance attractiveness of the Russian Federation for international migrants (Mukomel, 2005; Suleymanova & Ryabova, 2016). The liberalization of migration policy following upon the repressive period has prioritized the tasks of increasing volumes of migration, improving statistical reporting, enlarging legal space for temporary migration and partial regulation of the status of illegal migrants, stimulating highly skilled migrants (the State Migration Policy Concept of the Russian Federation through to 2025; Ivahnyuk, 2015), but the process of normative regulation and evaluation of risks, related to migration, is just beginning. Several measures were implemented to ensure social integration and adaptation of migrants, allowing them to learn Russian language, history and basis of law, obtain information about cultural traditions of Russian peoples, rules, practices and behaviours, receive legal support, vocational training and retraining (Malahov, 2015; Mukomel, 2016; Maximov, Morkovkina, & Omelchenko, 2017), but there are still many problems related to the regulation of migratory processes.

The theoretical analysis shows that there doesn't exist a unique and exhaustive conception, encompassing all risks and threats, related to labour migration (Omelchenko, Maximova, & Noyanzina, 2018). Moreover, the scholarly and policy debates on migration change periodically from pessimistic, stressing on negative impacts and effects, to optimistic, highlighting positive outcomes of migration, reflecting more general shifts in theoretical paradigms, dominating for any given period (De Haas, 2010). Two general discourses can be identified regarding risky nature of migration. One of them – criminalization of migration, establishing links between migration and organized crime, arm and drug smuggling, human trafficking (Düvell, 2008; Mencutek, 2012; Ryazantsev, Karabulatova, Mashin, Pismennaya, & Sivoplyasova, 2015). Another one is a discourse of securitization referring to the destabilizing effects of migration on domestic integration and to the dangers for public order it implied (Huysmans, 2000). It promotes restrictive legislative and administrative measures to ensure the security of borders and national integrity. Both approaches have been much criticized for limitations they constitute to rights potentially

granted to immigrants on the basis of universal human rights, the spread of anxiety and apprehension, ethnic tensions and turmoil in receiving countries (Ceyhan & Tsoukala, 2002; Fauser, 2006; Bourbeau, 2011).

In order to move beyond alarm to more ethnic context, where migrants aren't associated with existential danger, a process of de-securitization of migration has been launched (Huysmans & Squire 2009), providing recognition of a right to mobility, elaboration of more equitable policies in the field of migration (Pécoud & de Guchteneire, 2006, pp. 73, 75-76, 82).

Assuming that the general notion of risk represents a probability or threat of damage, injury, liability, or any other negative occurrence that is caused by external or internal vulnerabilities (Haines, 2009; Aven, 2011), and that risk becomes "social" if it is considered as a matter of some collectivity, such as social organization, group, nation or state, we share the view that risks are mental concepts which are constructed since they depend on social norms and expert opinions (Beck, 2013; Renn, 2017). They contain both objective and subjective components reflecting its complexity and the principal challenge is to understand how they are combined, constructed, interpreted and managed (Hansson, 2010). With regards to international migration it means that a comprehensive risk analysis should address data about not only objective but also subjective aspects, compare different points of view and opinions representing different parties: sending and receiving societies, and migrants themselves as subjects and objects of risky behaviour.

As a starting point in analyzing the risk - vulnerability link regarding migration and migrants we propose a broad conceptual framework, based on the idea of heterogeneity of migration impacts (De Haas, 2010), interrelation and interdependence between objects and subjects of risks, which might be attributed to individual, social group or societal level, and determination of risks by local socio-economic situation, national migration policy and global migration trends. The variety of negative migration outcomes for migrants and receiving society, considered in the study, include economic, social, cultural, socio-psychological and physical risks which are explained through subjective assessments and attitudes of population from receiving society and a "feedback" from migrants.

## **2. Problem Statement**

The international migration into Russia is characterized by diverse and multiple migration itineraries, considerable flows of illegal migrants, functioning of non-formal well-developed infrastructure on the base of ethnic communities and ethnic diasporas. Border regions are more severely impacted by international migration costs of border crossing and primary adaptation of migrants. Unfortunately, contemporary state of migration situation doesn't permit to use its opportunities and benefits both for migrants and receiving regions, rather it is associated with risks and vulnerabilities. Effective regulation of migration processes needs evidence-based researched to describe qualitative and quantitative components of migration, that points to the importance of the current study.

## **3. Research Questions**

The main research questions discussed in the study relate to:

- the subjective assessment of the character of migration situation in the region, predominance and intensity of migration flows, risks and opportunities of migrations by the population, living in border region;

- the general attitudes of population towards migrants and its support for regulation measures arising therefrom;
- the assessment of the social well-being of migrants, their relations with local population and diasporas, authorities and public institutions as indicators of the risk.

#### **4. Purpose of the Study**

The purpose of the study consisted in examination of subjective views, attitudes and evaluations, related to migrants' risks and vulnerabilities, from both parties involved in the process: local population on the one hand and migrants themselves on the other.

#### **5. Research Methods**

To accomplish the above tasks, the sociological research "Transit migration, transit regions and Russian migration policy: security and Eurasian integration" was conducted in the Altai region – a typical poly-ethnic region of Asian borderland, occupying a middle position in the national socio-economic rating (RIA rating, 2016) with similar to all Russian regions demographical problems, related to natural depopulation and aging. The population survey data was gathered by means of stratified multi-stage sampling (n=932), there was a fairly even distribution of males and females, aged 18-29 years – 29.9%, aged 30-49 years – 41.1%, aged 50 years and over – 29.0%, 79.3% resided in urban settlements and 20.7% – in rural area, 80.1% of those who reported about their ethnicity (65.1%) were Russians, 6.5% – Armenians, 4.4% – Kazakhs, 1.9% – Uzbeks, 3.8% had mixed ethnicity.

The survey among migrants was carried out in places of their work and residence, in testing centres and migration services (n=317). Most surveyed migrants come from CIS countries (Kazakhstan –35.6%, Tajikistan – 22.1%, Uzbekistan – 19.2%, Kirgizstan – 7.9%, Azerbaijan – 3.5%, Armenia – 4.7%, Belarus – 0.9%), and Ukraine (3.8%), other countries were poorly but represented (China, Germany, Georgia, Egypt, Moldova). Respondents' age – from 16 to 72 years, mean age – 30.4 years. At the time of the survey, 18% of migrants stayed in Russia less than a month, 29% – up to half a year, 15% – 7-11 months, 23% – 1-3 years and 16% – more than 3 years, over half of surveyed migrants (52%) have already visited Russia earlier. Three groups of migrants were divided depending on plans and intentions: temporary labor migrants, staying in the region for a short period of time (39.7%), potential settlers with desire to stay in Russia and receive citizenship (50.8%) and transit migrants, seeking to reach other regions of Russia or other countries (9.5%).

#### **6. Findings**

##### **6.1. Characteristics of migration situation as the context for migrants' risk evaluation**

Our research has shown that people living in the Altai region are rather unconcerned by international migration problems and describe the regional migration situation as calm and unproblematic (42.8% of answers), only 19.9% of respondents have reported about vigorous inflows of foreign migrants and inhabitants from other regions, markedly different by their language and culture (12.7%). Considering the problematic socio-economic position of the region (39.8% of respondents qualified it as rather

disadvantaged and poorly developed region, another 19.2% – as economically depressive) and acute problems of depopulation it was significant that 35.6% of surveyed people have noted that there is a great outflow of people migrating to other regions of Russia or other countries. Indeed, recent statistical data show that only in 2016 the population loss in the Altai region was about 6.5 thousand people, especially due to exchange with other Russian regions (8 thousand people had left the Altai region to find better life in wealthier neighbour or central regions). International migration growth of 1480 persons had only partially re-established the population balance (table 1).

**Table 01.** Statistical data about international migration and population growth (source: *Federal State Statistics Service*)

Regions	General migration growth, 2016	International migration growth, 2016	Average International migration growth, 2008-2016	Exchange with other Russian regions, 2016	Natural Population growth rate per thousand, 2016
Russian Federation	261 948	261 948	259 506	-	-0,02
Siberian Federal District	-12590	34 830	34 965	-47 420	0,76
Altai territory	-6472	1 480	4 083	-7 952	-1,95

## 6.2. Migrants and “natives”: uncoerced acquiescence or hidden grievance?

Since the population didn't perceive the migration situation as threatening, the majority reported about positive feelings and attitudes they have towards international migrants: 42.7% and 27.1% of respondents have noted that they had rather positive or friendly attitude towards foreign workers, whereas 24.4% – had rather negative and 5.8% – strongly negative attitudes. Most respondents evaluated very favourably the perspective of education of their children together with children from families coming from near abroad or ex-USSR republics: 20.5% of respondents underlined that it might give opportunity for international communication and 57.4% simply stated that it will be normal and good. About 15% of those who has answered this question were against joint education of their children and children of migrant background, especially living in cities (18.2%, in rural settlements only 4.2%,  $p < 0.01$ , chi-square test).

Meanwhile, answering questions about the presence of “guest workers” on Russian labor market, 87.4% agreed with the statement that Russia should prepare its own specialists instead of paying migrants. About a half of respondents (46.5%) supported the idea of restricting access for foreign citizens in their place of residence, 8.7% – were adamantly opposed to all categories of migrants, whereas only 34.0% of participants expressed disagreement with restrictive measures.

Even if most respondents were not opposed to migrants as such, they believed that the government should be favourable to young and skilled migrants and restrict the entry to disabled or low-educated people (28.6%), stimulate return migration of Russian and Russian-speaking population as opposed to other nationalities (31.5%). More than a quarter of participants (26.8%) supported integrative migration policies tending to attract and support first and foremost fellow-countrymen of different ethnicities living in the new states of the former Soviet Union, almost the same proportion of respondents (24.3%) indicated that the government should support all who wants to arrive in the Russian Federation to take up permanent

residence. Addressing issues of illegal migration 60% of respondents argued for forced deportation of illegals from CIS countries and only 22.8% allow for the possibility of their legalization, help for finding a work and acculturation in Russia.

### 6.3. Opportunities of international migration and migrants' vulnerability

In the research the respondents were asked to assess the set of statements about positive and negative impacts of international migration and risk that migrants take during their stay in Russia. The extent of agreement was assessed by 10-point scales (from 1 point – “totally disagree” to 10 points – “absolutely agree”). Then answers were regrouped in three categories – low values of consent (1-3 points), middle values (4-7 points) and high values (8-10 points) (table 2).

In fulfilling this task most respondents gave middle values within 4-7 points range that was indicative for difficulties in expressing their point of view, and so it was more appropriate to consider only low and high values. Among possible opportunities of international migration, the most important for population were those related to economic advantages, especially fast and cheap work done by migrants (47.78% of high values) and the possibility to ensure the need in low-qualified labour force (34.1%), ideas about growing cultural diversity and enhancement of inter-ethnic communication were not much appreciated, as well as the statement that migration could make up shortfalls in highly qualified specialists (only 7.8% of high values).

Thorough consideration of negative effects (the second part of the table) has led to a conclusion about alarmist and highly biased representations of population about migration: 42.8% of respondents agree that migration leads to a deterioration of security situation, 41.5% – that migrants increase tension on the labour market by occupying workplaces of local residents, over a third part – that migrants are blurring traditional Russian culture and way of life, bring new diseases and facilitate formation of negative stereotypes. The most important thing is that only 11% of respondents agreed that migrants are socially excluded, have limited rights and freedoms, experience discrimination.

**Table 02.** The assessment of risks and opportunities caused by international migration, %

	<b>Effects of migration: risks and opportunities</b>	<b>Low values</b>	<b>Middle values</b>	<b>High values</b>
Positive effects	Migration is generally good for economic development	30,3	53,46	16,23
	Migrants make Russia more open to new ideas and cultures, bring ethnic and cultural diversity	35,43	51,57	13
	Migrants do the work faster and cheaper than local population	11,48	40,74	47,78
	Migrants help to improve demographic situation in the country	39,85	45,46	14,69
	Migration ensures the need in low-qualified labor force, workers of non-prestigious professions	17,53	48,38	34,09
	Migration make up shortfalls in highly qualified specialists	50,11	42,1	7,79
Negative	Migrants increase labor market competition and occupy workplaces of local residents	17,16	41,37	41,48

Migrants are socially excluded, they have limited rights and freedoms, experience discrimination	44,9	44,47	10,63
Migration leads to a deterioration of security situation	10,05	47,14	42,81
Migration is blurring traditional Russian culture and way of life	16,96	50,33	32,72
Migrants bring new diseases, transmit infections and contribute to their prevalence	21,62	45,84	32,54
Migration facilitates formation of negative stereotypes about representation of other nationalities	15,98	48,7	35,33

#### 6.4. What do migrants themselves think and feel?

One of the most important indicators of migrants' social well-being is subjective perception of safety and absence of threats to the life and health. Answering question "In what extent do you feel safe in Russia?" more than half of surveyed migrants have reported that they feel absolutely safe (52.8%), about 40% reported about rather good safety, 88.4% of respondent had never faced violence or nationalism. The level of satisfaction with different facets of the life was high as well: 84.6% of guest workers were highly satisfied with family relations, 72.8% – with relationships with colleagues, 67.6% – with their work, 66.4% – with their life in whole, 65.2% – with their health, the lowest levels were identified regarding the support of national associations (52.7%) religious community (50.3%).

Relationships with local population were also assessed as rather peaceful and friendly (44.7%), negative attitudes were mentioned by 13% (among them 1.8% have reported about sharp tension). The majority of respondents have noted that they believe in mutual understanding and cooperation between "natives" and newcomers (76.6%).

Notwithstanding these good relations with local community and desire to integrate into Russian society, the significant part of newcomers, especially those who work temporary and don't want to stay in Russia for a long time (about a third part) try to keep their own cultural identity and social connections, without creating new bonds or preferences: they are more glad to be in the company of people only from their homeland, have best friends only there, celebrate holidays and prepare food (15%), think and act according to their national mentality.

When responding to the survey, migrants have highly assessed their trust towards family and friends, whereas evaluations of trust towards local authorities and communities were somewhat discreet: 61.4% trusted their employer, 52.4% – the mission of the country, 47.5% – migration centres and services, 43% – police and law enforcement agencies. Almost the same level of trust was observed regarding to ethnic diasporas and public associations, protecting the migrants' rights.

Most respondents have noted that they rarely ask for help from their countrymen and ethnic diaspora (37.6% said "yes"). In case where it occurs, these connections are used for receiving help concerning adaptation to new conditions of life, knowledge about country, rules of behavior (53.3%), registration and receiving permits from authorities (41.8%), search for employment (40.8%), financial aid (39.2%), education of children (41.3%) and resolution of problems and conflicts, related to promotion, payment etc. (40.8%).

## 7. Conclusion

Given that migration situation in the border region where the study took place had quiet and non-problematic character, migrants' risks and vulnerabilities were assessed as minor and improbable, surveyed population and migrants reported about friendly attitudes towards each other and readiness to cooperate. Meanwhile, considering biased and limited representations of population about migration, focused largely on disadvantages and several problems of adaptation and integration of migrants preferring to rely on informal networks in resolving their problems, we can conclude that migrants' risks, especially related to confrontation with local population had hidden character and might become apparent without weighted and well-elaborated measures in the field of national and migration policy, aimed to promote changes in public conscience and increase trust towards state and public institutions, involved in the process of migration regulation.

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