

MIGRATION TO RUSSIA AND EUROPE: GENDER AND VULNERABILITIES

INTERVIEW WITH PROFESSOR VICTOR AGADJANIAN AT THE KU CENTER FOR MIGRATION RESEARCH

Migration has been a key issue in policy and political agendas all over the world. For centuries, people have migrated to other lands for employment and a better life. How does migration affect these individuals and their families, and what impact does migration have on the sending and receiving communities? We visit with Professor Agadjanian concerning his research on migration trends and their impact on communities and the families left behind. Victor Agadjanian is Co-Director of the KU Center for Migration Research and Foundation Distinguished Professor of Sociology.



CREES: “How did you get interested in migration research? Was your interest tied to your family’s migration?”

Agadjanian: To some extent, it’s tied to my own experiences as a migrant. My parents migrated from Armenia to Moscow. At that time, it was internal migration, like moving from Kansas to New York. It was not a big deal, compared to my own migration experience of growing up in Moscow and then coming to the United States to do graduate work. Of course, my professional interest in migration goes way beyond my own experiences. Around the world, migration is a very important part of everyday life. It shapes the social fabric, economic conditions and prospects, and culture in complex ways, and I am intrigued and fascinated by this complexity.

CREES: Do people usually migrate for work or better opportunities elsewhere?

Agadjanian: Yes. In most cases migration is driven by people’s quest to improve their lives, and it is often a temporary move, or at least, it’s intended as such. It’s what we call “labor migration.” In other words, migration for work, to earn an income, so as to transfer that income, or at least part of it, back to the home country, to the community of origin, to improve living conditions and opportunities for the family back home. Most of migration around the world is driven by similar motives. We just don’t think of it as typical for our society, as we are much more attuned to “permanent immigration,” in which people come into the United States and other countries to settle permanently. Even in such cases, people do not sever ties from the communities of origin. In fact,

even that kind of migration is part of a bigger family project. Who goes first? Who will stay back? Those who we call “immigrants” remain very much connected with their homeland because they have families there. They have economic interests, cultural ties and they may still be politically involved and even vote in elections in their home country.

What really is subject to a lot of debate and research is the kind of impact those connections have both on migrants, in terms of their integration into the new society, and on their families, those whom migrants left behind, and their lives, opportunities, and aspirations.

CREES: What kind of impact do those connections have? Do you see both positive and negative impact, or does it depend on the family or culture?

Agadjanian: It depends on the family and on the social conditions and socioeconomic opportunities back home. Typically, when we think of migration and what migration means to the sending household and family in sending communities, we think primarily of financial resources. Migration is expected to generate those resources, in the form of what we call “remittances” to send back home. Now one question in migration research is whether those resources are indeed generated. Am I successful in generating those resources, by getting employment in the migration destination, and earning wages that can be partly shared? A second related question is whether migrants are really willing to send and how much are they willing to send back. They may come with this intention and then they may get distracted. A migrant may find another object of attention in their country of destination. Sometimes a romantic relationship develops in the destination country, and a newly formed family also needs the migrant’s resources. Thus, some of those families back home may suffer as a result. It’s not just the migrants’ success on the labor market, but the migrants’ willingness and ability to share that success with their families back home. In the beginning, everything may work well.

Another big question is: what happens to the money sent to the community of origin?

It is typically spent on family’s needs, children’s well-being, education, and healthcare. Sometimes it is invested in creating and expanding local businesses. That happens only when there is an appropriate environment for economic development. To start or build a business you need initial capital. You also need a market for your products or services. If you have the money to open a little shop, but there are no customers, you’re not going to do that. So in many small communities in Mexico, Armenia, or Kyrgyzstan, there is no such opportunity. Then, in many cases, migration remittances do not lead to economic development in the home country. Often, they just help other family members to migrate in the footsteps of the migrant. Again, if people don’t see prospects at home, for a number of reasons - economic, social, political and cannot be successful in their communities of origin, then they look elsewhere. Also, when a migrant is successful, others in their community want to follow his or her example. Migration tends to create new migration, thus perpetuating itself.

CREES: Which countries do more migrants leave from?

Agadjanian: Typically, migration is determined by relative economic opportunities, but also by traditional established connections between countries. In the former Soviet Union, many countries that have fewer economic opportunities are more likely to send migrants, than to receive them. They also send migrants to places where it’s easy for those migrants to go. In this case, it will be mainly the Russian Federation, because until relatively recently, they were part of the same country, the USSR. They are still very much connected by language and culture. Some countries like Armenia and Kyrgyzstan (where I’ve done much research) became members of the Eurasian Economic Union (EAEU), a Russian-led economic international organization that besides Russia, also includes Kazakhstan, Belarus, and now Armenia and Kyrgyzstan. Therefore, it is much easier to migrate legally and start working in Russia from those countries. Thus, differences in wages, differences in economic opportunities, traditional connections, and legal and economic costs of migration shape this process. That’s why we see this massive

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A beautiful view of a village in the Tavush province of Armenia where Agadjanian's fieldwork took place.

migration from the poorer parts of the former Soviet Union to Russia.

Of course, there is migration from other parts of the former Soviet Union like Moldova, Ukraine, or the Baltic countries. However, that migration also reflects their new orientation to Western Europe. Increasingly there are many migrants from Moldova, Ukraine and the Baltics going West, to the United Kingdom, Germany, and some to Southern Europe. And many of those migrant workers are women. Many of these countries are attractive given the rapid aging of their populations, and an increasing demand for personal care of the elderly. For example, many women from Eastern Europe, Moldova, and Ukraine go to Italy and Spain to work, providing this care. Migrants from the former Soviet Union are more attractive as they are cheaper to hire, compared to locals. Elderly care is not a very exciting line of work, especially for younger people, so it's very hard to find locals, Italians, or Spaniards who would

be willing to provide care for 80 year olds. Plus, many of them work semi-illegally and you can pay them less. They are often not protected by labor laws.

CREES: Is it easier to work legally in Russia if you are from the former Soviet Union?

Agadjanian: Citizens of most former Soviet republics do not need a visa to enter Russia, which is already a big difference, compared to many Western European countries and the United States, where just getting there is a problem. Still, most migrants in Russia work illegally or semi-illegally and are paid, increasingly so, in cash. In Russia, they call this “black” or “gray salaries” or “in the envelope,” or in other words, paid cash by their employer and there's no taxation. At the same time, this employment doesn't offer any security or safety to workers. If you are not legally employed, you can be fired at any time. And you can be subject to a frequent form of abuse, as employers do not pay what

they promise. Then you cannot do anything, because there is no law that protects you. Some may choose this arrangement. Some may not have a choice. In fact, increasingly, many Russian citizens choose this kind of arrangement too. Many employers don't want this flow of resources and money to go to the state, to be taxed. Even if you are legally entitled to work and you have all your paperwork, sometimes you don't, because you don't see the benefit, or your employer sets this as a precondition.

CREES: What are conditions typically like for women migrants in Russia?

Agadjanian: In addition to providing care for the elderly or children, there are other niches for women's employment. That's why the share of women among migrants in Russia and elsewhere is rising. And migrant women are typically at a greater disadvantage compared to men. They are more likely to be abused, underpaid, to be fired, less

likely to defend or stand up for their rights, or insist that their employers meet their obligations. And, of course, there is always the added penalty of sexual harassment and sexual abuse that women face everywhere in the world. Many times, sexual abuse against migrant women is perpetrated by employers, as part of the “package” to secure their employment. Often times, it is perpetrated by law enforcement agents, as a sort of “sexual tax,” that women have to pay to be left alone, especially if they are not legal.

CREES: That’s difficult, because they are not in their own community, so they are more vulnerable.

Agadjanian: Indeed. But it is also important to see how migrants interact with other migrants. We tend to think of the immigrant experience in terms of immigrants versus natives dilemma or dichotomy. But many times migrants are abused by other migrants, who have been there longer and who have established a business, and hire migrants. They know that the new migrants are not going to complain to the police, fearing deportation. It happens unfortunately. There is an illusion that many of us have of migrant solidarity, of solidarity of the vulnerable. Solidarity does happen, but so does abuse of migrants by other migrants. This occurs, not because they are inherently bad people or worse people than natives, but due to the circumstances of everyone’s life. It all has to do with the challenges of migrant existence. Our team in Russia interviewed a lot of women, and they often talk about sexual harassment and abuse. And oftentimes, it’s done by other migrants, some of whom are relatively wealthy. And even when migrant women are directly forced to have sex, they are often offered a job or a discount on their rent, or other opportunities or perks in exchange for sexual services. These sexual favors are different from direct coercion, but nonetheless, it is also a product of migrant women’s added vulnerability. In addition to being marginalized, as many migrants are, especially in the context of Russia, where there is a lot of xenophobia and resentment against migrants, migrant women have a higher risk of being abused because of their gender. In some cases, a male migrant will resist that abuse and try to move away or stand up to someone, who is abusing them. However, it’s much more difficult for women to do.

Sometimes we look at the suffering and injustices that migrants face, and some of us inevitably ask, “Why are you still here if your life is so tough? If you are abused and deceived, if you are not paid what you were

promised, if you have to work more than you are paid for, if you are sexually abused...Why are you still here?” And for many migrants, the answer is: because, counting all the disadvantages and challenges, it is still a better option than staying back in the village, having no opportunities and no hope.

CREES: I read about women, who migrated because they had children to support back home. Sometimes, they are the only provider of their families. Do you find this in your interviews with women?

Agadjanian: This is a big issue for women, especially in patriarchal settings of Central Asia or the Caucasus. On the one hand, women feel obligated to provide for their children, especially in cases where the marriage has dissolved or there is no male partner to help support the children. On the other hand, that often conflicts with a cultural expectation of what women should and should not do. In many of those countries, it is not culturally acceptable for women to move and work on their own. You are supposed to stay home to take care of your family while your husband will earn an income and provide for you and the children. For a woman, especially a young unmarried woman, to go to work elsewhere for some time, that already puts a stigma or label on her. She’s not seen as a decent, good woman. If she comes back, she often has no chance of getting married, because she does not meet the ideal of the perfect traditional woman. It’s a big additional penalty that women have to endure. If you go to Russia on your own, you have little chance of being accepted back, even by your family. After working elsewhere, some women go back to a different place, because simply, “If I go back to my own village, everyone will be pointing fingers at me, saying ‘that whore came back, after working and sleeping with men in Russia.’” It’s a highly patriarchal society and men cannot come to grips with the fact that women may also need to earn income on their own. Yet, some of it is changing. You see a large number of women, who actually migrate to Russia. And you think about Western Europe and that niche I described in elderly care. It’s disproportionately women, working in elderly care. So you’ll see increasingly women going to work and often the men staying behind. It’s a very new phenomenon, but if you think how dramatically it transforms a local patriarchal arrangement... Essentially, not only does the woman become the main breadwinner, but she is also the migrant. The husband is the one who stays home with the children. However, this arrange-

ment puts men in a subordinate role. And many times it is a stressful process. When the roles are reversed, when women earn the income and command more economic resources, it clashes with their traditional roles and sometimes they become victims of domestic violence and abuse. Men do not want to accept this challenge of women earning more, being more successful economically, being a more important member of the family. Of course, this is not unique to the former Soviet Union. Domestic violence is often driven by this upset balance of power within the family. Some men cannot handle the fact that women rise economically and socially. And that creates conflict.

As part of the KU Center for Migration Research, we are equally interested in all aspects of migration: where migration starts and why; what happened to those communities; the process of migration - how people move and where they go; and of course, the consequence of migration - where they settle, how they settle; what happened to them as they settle and integrate, and what happens to their native communities and receiving communities. How do locals interact with immigrants? How does the host society change in response to immigration? What potential tensions, problems and challenges emerge as immigrants arrive, in terms of perceived or real economic competition for jobs? What cultural differences exist between immigrants and natives? And of course, how it translates into politics. We see very vividly in the recent election, how immigration can be used as a propaganda tool to mobilize political support. The supposed threat of immigration is an easy rallying slogan and not just in the United States. Everywhere in Western Europe you see increasing use of anti-immigrant rhetoric to achieve political goals, especially on the far right. In the end, what is concerning is how it affects the political process and elections in different countries. And who comes to power and what do people do about that, not just with respect to immigration itself, but other aspects of the political process. Immigration is just one instrument and tool that politicians use.

The KU Center for Migration Research was established in the spring of 2016. Its mission is to promote, coordinate and facilitate innovative high-quality interdisciplinary research on how human migration both shapes and is shaped by the social landscapes in which it takes place at the local, regional, national, and global levels. Foundation Distinguished Professors Cecilia Menjivar and Victor Agadjanian co-direct the Center.