

Transnational and National Identities of Kyrgyz Labor Migrants: Death or Expansion of Nation-State

Emil Nasritdinov, AUCA, Kyrgyzstan

Ruslan Rahimov, AUCA, Kyrgyzstan

Paper abstract submitted to the first annual international conference "*Twenty Years of Central Asian Independence: Shared Past, Separate Paths?*" at the AUCA, Bishkek, 14-16 October 2011.

The main theoretical discussion of this paper is grounded in contemporary literature on transnationalism – an established field of study that focuses on people living lives, which are rooted in more than one country. One of the major ideas of transnationalism is that globalization in all of its multiple facets, one of which is migration, has a significant impact on the nature, role and function of the nation-state as a territorial, economic and political unit. Some propose that the nation-state is losing its significance and is giving way to various transnational institutions. Others suggest, on the contrary, that in the context of various transnational processes the position and policies of the nation-states – whether on sending or receiving ends of migration chains – become only more important. This paper proposes that nation-states and their citizens, wherever they are, are tied strongly by their identities: national identity is something like a tattoo, which is hard to erase or forget. No matter how far away migrants travel from their country of origin, they are still haunted by processes taking place in their countries, not least because of the ease with which information is made available via contemporary means of communication not only to them, but to people around them as well. Change of citizenship can be seen as an attempt to “cover” the tattoo and to rebel against the “essential” images embedded into one’s thinking through discourses on nationality, which were so powerful in the Soviet and Post-Soviet history. Therefore the individual and national self are not easily separated. Moreover, as long as the national self has rather negative connotations, like in the case of Kyrgyzstan, the individual self struggles to come to terms with it. This is visible in the life of Kyrgyz migrants, a life which often becomes one of tragedy of not belonging, or of belonging to a nation of which one is not proud. This paper proceeds by first looking at the transnational self-identity of migrants, secondly by analyzing how transnational image of Kyrgyz is perceived by others, and finally by describing Kyrgyz national identity through the prism of historical and contemporary discourse and the complex idea of returning home. The links between transnational and national identities is sought throughout and discussed in the conclusion. The research is based on the fieldwork conducted in three Russian cities: Kazan, Yekaterinburg and Moscow in the summer of 2011.