

## Problems of Social Integration for Repatriates in Kazakhstan

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Doi:10.5901/mjss.2014.v5n20p2625

### Abstract

*The integration of repatriates in Kazakhstan's society has recently been the subject of much debate in the government, media, and general public. This study explores challenges associated with the social integration (i.e., adaptation) of Kazakh repatriates and provides broad recommendations for how to ameliorate them. The challenges faced by repatriates are now recognized as being highly important to not only the repatriates themselves but also Kazakh society as a whole. In light of Kazakhstan's potential labor shortage, it is in the country's economic interests to attract foreign Kazakhs and Uzbeks who can participate in the labor market. In this situation, national security should be designated a priority. Further, to accommodate a large-scale influx of foreign Kazakhs, the nation must consider what forms of social policy are appropriate to meet the needs of this group. This consideration is necessary because presently, the state can afford only a small quota for resettlement and living expenses.*

**Keywords:** Oralman, adapyation, society

## 1. Introduction

In this study, we investigate challenges to the social integration of Kazakh repatriates in Kazakhstan and consider their adaptation from three perspectives: linguistic, psychological, and material. Data are collected from a survey of repatriates in Almaty as well as participant interviews. In addition, having identified some common barriers to integration, we suggest potential ways of ameliorating the situation, specifically through changes to social policy.

## 2. Definitions

“Repatriate” in our study refers to ethnic Kazakhs who have returned after living in neighboring countries. We employ Russian scientist Vorobyeva’s [Remark 2] definition of migration as “any territorial displacement associated with the intersection of both external and internal borders of the administrative-territorial entities in order to change the permanent place of residence or temporary residence in the territory for study or work, regardless of the prevailing influence of the factor under which it occurs {1.1 [EN] Please check the change}—attracting or ejector.”[1]

Furthermore, as the notion of adaptation is central to our research, it is important to clarify our use of the term. Adaptation is a key concept that links analytical psychology and biology. It consists of both active and passive components and must be distinguished from adjustment, which represents mainly autoplasmic passive phenomenon.[2] In his typological model, Jung described two substantially different types of adaptation: introversion and extraversion. [Remark 3] Violations of adaptation are associated with psychological neurosis.

## 3. Background: Repatriates in Kazakhstan

According to the Committee on Migration of the Ministry of Labor and Social Protection, during the period of 1991–2005, a total of 481,491 people, comprising 122,800 families, were repatriated to Kazakhstan. The majority of this group came from China, Mongolia, Uzbekistan, Russia, Iran, and other neighboring countries. The current quota for repatriates has increased to 15,000 families a year.

Although some repatriates have reintegrated into the local community more or less successfully, others face challenges that may force them to return to the country from where they have come.[3] Two main challenges that have been discussed pertain to government allowance and employment. In 2007, for example, the national budget allocated for repatriates was 1.2 billion *tenge*. According to the Law of the Republic of Kazakhstan, the state pays a lump sum and housing allowances to repatriates who are included in the immigration quota. Currently, the head of the family receives, upon arrival, 15 times the monthly index (MI) and an additional 10 MI for each family member. However, it is unrealistic to expect that a repatriate family can find accommodations for this amount.

A second problem often cited is that of unemployment. Various schools of economics have attempted to explain the causes of unemployment. One of the earliest explanations was given by British economist and clergyman Malthus in his “Essay on the Principle of Population.” Malthus observed that unemployment is caused by demographic factors, specifically, when population growth exceeds the rate of economic growth. {1.1 [EN] Please check the change} [4] In the case of Kazakh repatriates, however, many have been unable to find permanent work because they cannot legalize their immigration status, obtain citizenship or a residence permit, or, in many cases, cannot speak Russian. In response to this situation, the parliament adopted amendments to national immigration law, with a particular focus on repatriates. The government recognized the unsatisfactory work arrangement for the immigrants. Soon, all over Kazakhstan, plans were adopted to open centers [Remark 4] for immigrants. The first such center was recently [Remark 5] opened in Karaganda.

## 4. The Study

Against the background of migration and the legal policy described above, this study explores in greater detail the problems concerning social adaptation of repatriates in Kazakhstan. We focus on repatriates in the nation’s largest city, Almaty. We hypothesize that repatriates in Almaty face obstacles in their adaptation to Kazakh society, including homelessness, unemployment, difficulties obtaining citizenship, and language problems.

It should be noted that the very status of Almaty—the metropolis, and country’s educational and cultural center—is partially responsible for the problems experienced by the repatriates. First, many of the repatriates currently living in Almaty received a residence quota in another area but later moved to Almaty for reasons such as in search of work or to be with family. This has increased the load on the metropolis in terms of housing, employment opportunities, and social services, leading to a deterioration of the social adaptation of repatriates in the city. Further, most repatriates in the city

are students. Although students are often more receptive and adaptable to new or unfamiliar conditions, their status as students can initially obscure problems that they may face in near future. Issues of housing and employment are generally deferred for students, who live at or near the university and generally seek no full-time employment until graduation. Once this deferment is over, their need for housing and employment emerges quite sharply. In addition, the pattern is that first these students arrive in Kazakhstan, and once they graduate and secure jobs, their parents, siblings, or other relatives also arrive. {1.1 [EN] Please check the change} Thus, successful adaptation of the students graduating from college can be a powerful stimulus for the influx of foreign Kazakhs in the country.

Objective conditions that affect the immigrants' degree of adaptation to Kazakhstan's society are, of course, the length of stay in the country, the state from which they arrived, age, occupation, and other such characteristics. Of the repatriates currently living in Almaty, the majority (58%) arrived between one and five years ago. Given that the approximate time needed for adaptation is about five years, [Remark 6] it becomes clear that less than half of the city's repatriates have had adequate time to adapt to their new environment.

Characteristics of the snowball sampling method used in this study allowed a certain degree of accuracy to determine where repatriates in the city are concentrated.[5] Residents of the Auezovsky and Zhetysusky areas account for 68.5% of the survey participants. In the third place for the largest concentration of repatriates is the Bostandyksky district. Finally, smaller numbers of survey participants reported living in the central and marginal Almalinsky and Turksibsky districts. Overall, the study results show that repatriates live either in the outlying districts of the city or in the dormitories of major universities.

Location certainly emerges as a negative factor in the adaptation of repatriates as the Auezovsky and Zhetysusky areas lack in adequate services and infrastructure, and some areas have problems concerning illegal possession of land.

The large number of repatriates living near universities was somewhat surprising. While students were living in the university dormitories, university staff members such as teachers and technicians were found to be living in nearby hostels. This factor must be recognized as a positive influence on the adaptation of repatriates.

In the overall picture of repatriates in Almaty, the factor of age is positively stained. The survey participants were mostly young adults: 65.3% were aged 18 to 29 years. This fact is due, in our opinion, to features of the migration flow in Almaty. Young people, including repatriates, come to study, work, and engage in business. For example, it is quite common for youths to arrive as students and their adult family members to join them later. {1.1 [EN] Please check the change} Another explanation for the large proportion of young adults lies in greater openness and "contact" among the young repatriates, who were not afraid to answer the survey questions. The prevalence of young repatriates should be considered a positive factor, given that young people can generally be trained easily and learn new skills and abilities that allow them to adapt quickly to new conditions. In addition, young repatriates are less likely to suffer from feelings of resentment or guilt surrounding their move when compared to members of the older generation.[6]

The socio-professional composition of Kazakh repatriates is largely determined by the prevalence of young adults, particularly, the large proportion of university students. To some extent, the data obtained in the study can be explained by the distortions arising from the use of snowball sampling, which cannot be considered absolutely reliable. However, we took proactive measures, which included the requirement to interview no more than five high school students as contacts from each initial participant. Other students were interviewed in the course of obtaining the addresses and phone numbers of the other participants.

Therefore, we can, with high probability, believe that about 40%–45% of repatriates living in Almaty are students. The second largest group among the target population consists of workers in industry, construction, transport, and communication; the third largest group consists of those in trades and services. There is a surprising lack of education professionals, health care workers, government officials, and artists. Perhaps they simply were not included in the survey because they are dispersed in different parts of the city, or perhaps there are not many repatriates with these occupations due to the high competition in these industries in Almaty.

Another important, objective factor is the migratory flow to Almaty, the biggest city in Kazakhstan. In this case we are interested, not in the general migration situation but in the specific migration flow of repatriates. At present, the town is dominated by the repatriates from three countries: China, Uzbekistan, and Mongolia. Arrivals from China account for about half of all the repatriates in Almaty. [Remark 7] This is likely attributable to the proximity of the city to the southern border with China.

Analysis of the survey data revealed certain trends in the migration of repatriates in Almaty. First, the rate of immigration by repatriates is increasing. The first five years of independence (1992–1996) saw 19.1% of the current repatriates, and the next five years, 22.7%. Recent migration (2002–2006) accounts for 58% of all current repatriates. This is due, of course, to Kazakhstan's economic success, which makes the country more attractive than Uzbekistan, Kyrgyzstan, and Mongolia.

Another trend is associated with a change in the social status of repatriates as they integrate into Kazakh society. Thus, among the first wave of repatriates who have found employment (many of them former students who have graduated) are workers in business, trade and industry, construction, transport, and communications. Those who arrived in the country 5–10 years ago work in construction, transport, and communications, and some are university students. Finally, those who arrived within the last five years have not yet adapted. For example, 91.3% of unemployed repatriates arrived within the last five years. Many newly arrived repatriates are students (63.6% of the total).

Yet another trend among repatriates in Almaty is “secondary” migration. Secondary migration refers to cases in which repatriates, having received a quota for resettlement in other areas and cities of the country, go to these areas first, receive living and housing allowances, and then come to Almaty in search of work, education or business. In our survey, 8.4% of respondents reported that they had lived in another city or part of Kazakhstan before moving to Almaty. Most of these workers were in industry, construction, transport, or communications; they accounted for 24.8% of the total. Therefore, another indicator that should be taken into account when analyzing the factors that contribute to or impede successful adaptation of repatriates is the reason that the repatriates decided to change their place of residence. The main reason, cited by nearly three-quarters of the participants, is to return to their historical homeland. This is highly favorable in the context of social integration of repatriates in Kazakhstan society because it suggests that the majority of them intend to stay permanently in the country as opposed to remaining only on a short-term basis.

Let us now consider adaptation in a big city such as Almaty. Of the three main types of adaptation identified in the Introduction— linguistic, psychological, and material— most problems arise in material adaptation (in particular, regarding employment). Linguistic adaptation is the second most problematic. This claim is made on the basis of our finding that only 32.4% of respondents found it difficult to determine where and when they face language problems. Indirect evidence that the vast majority of repatriates experience language problems is found in the survey data. In response to a question about language proficiency, 100% of the survey participants reported that they could only speak Kazakh. However, trade, public services, media, street advertising, and public institutions in Almaty regularly employ the use of Russian. Therefore, this finding allows us to make an unfavorable conclusion about the critical situation of repatriates’ linguistic adaptation. This conclusion is further evidenced by the responses to the questionnaire item “Ignorance of which language creates the most problems for you?” In answer, 98.7% of trade workers, 91.3% of the unemployed, and 85.7% of entrepreneurs responded “Russian.” For two categories (students and workers in industry, construction, transport, and communications), knowledge of English is also required. However, the current solution offered by the government, encouraging repatriates to study Russian, is not the obvious one. A more effective solution is to support and expand the scope of the official language. Specifically, the government should implement stricter requirements for institutions such as government agencies, banks, shops, and clinics to use the official state language, Kazakh. This will also resolve the language barrier that the repatriates face when dealing with government officials.

Furthermore, psychological adaptation should be recognized as a positive one for the repatriates. Ayzencka and his followers [Remark 8] employ a neobehavioristic definition of adaptation, describing it in two ways: (a) as a condition in which needs of the individual as well as requirements of the environment are completely satisfied (This is a condition of harmony between the individual and the natural and social environment), and (b) the process by which a condition of harmony is achieved.[7]

Such a conclusion can be made on the basis of the current psychological state of our study’s participants. The survey results show that 98.8% of repatriates rated their dominant mood of the last six months as “very good” or “rather good.” However, almost 80% were inclined to assess it as “rather good,” which, of course, is not wholeheartedly positive. In addition, the well-known positive perspective of Kazakh culture may have influenced participants’ responses. Another criterion for measuring the degree of psychological adaptation is to compare the respondents’ psychological condition before and after their move to Kazakhstan. This evaluation is not so optimistic and is strongly differentiated according to the participants’ socio-professional status. Yet, in general, more respondents (35.8%) [Remark 9] reported an improved psychological state after the move. Most participants [Remark 10] were satisfied with their lives and, oddly enough, also unemployed. Perhaps the unemployed had also been unemployed when they lived abroad, which may explain their current satisfaction with life. At the same time, as we have mentioned, the main reason for repatriation is a return to the historical homeland, which in itself may act as a strong positive influence on the psychological well-being of the individual. Importantly, it should be noted that workers in industry, construction, transport, and communications tended to report a deteriorated psychological state following their move to Kazakhstan.

Regarding material adaptation, repatriates gave the most negative evaluations of their satisfaction with their financial situation and the availability of work, even though, in comparison with their situation abroad, their financial situation had improved (62%). In fact, a significant improvement occurred in the expense estimates, mostly for students (94.6% reported improvement of their material wealth) and entrepreneurs (85.7%). At the same time, 52.3% of

employees in industry, construction, transport, and communications and 40.5% of workers in trades experienced deterioration in their financial situation.

Finally, we turn to material adaptation. As can be seen from the survey results, on average, the material prosperity of repatriates in Almaty today is rather low.

In addition to the common determinants (country of origin, length of residence, age, and social status), successful adaptation of repatriates is influenced by the challenges of living in a big city. These challenges (e.g., traffic, expensive housing, and environmental problems) are commonly faced by all citizens. However, they can be more acute for repatriates, compounded by the fact that they as a group have their own specific problems (e.g., language, and citizenship). We believe, therefore, that social policy should treat repatriates on a par with socially vulnerable groups as they will benefit from special treatment and government support. Such an approach will help solve the accumulated problems of repatriated Kazakhs.

We analyzed the challenges faced by repatriates from two viewpoints: objective and subjective. For the objective analysis, we asked participants to assess the challenges they faced in their adaptation to life in Almaty. The participants indicated that their most pressing problem was a lack of housing (72.2%), followed by unemployment. It is known that competition in Almaty's labor market (especially in the skilled and highly paid sectors) is very high, and some repatriates are unable to withstand the competition, for various reasons. {1.1 [EN] Please check the change}

Another problem is one that is readily evident to all who visit Almaty: the high cost of food and essential commodities in the city. As mentioned, competition for housing and employment as well as struggles with the high cost of living are challenges that all Almaty residents face; however, they can be especially disruptive to the lives of Kazakh repatriates, who must work around the issues while simultaneously dealing with the problems of linguistic and psychological adaptation. For this reason, repatriates require additional support from government policies.

## 5. Participant Interviews

Next, we use data from personal interviews for a subjective analysis of the issues. The interviewees reported problems similar to those mentioned in the survey. They supported the survey finding that repatriates' most urgent personal problem is a lack of their own homes: 69.1% of the interviewees experienced this problem. It was particularly relevant for the unemployed, housewives, business professionals, and students. In addition, we found that the problem of unemployment had two dimensions: As the second largest issue in employment, repatriates reported that they could not find jobs in their specialty (64.2%). An absence of worry was found most often among workers in industry, construction, transport, and communication, and employment in one's own specialty by workers in trade and service sectors. Third place in the interviewees' ranking of personal problems was an issue specific to this population group: the difficulty of obtaining citizenship, reported by 38.4%. This problem was most acute for the unemployed and housewives.

## 6. Discussion

Thus, the factors that primarily inhibit the successful adaptation of repatriates in Almaty are a lack of housing, unemployment, and difficulties associated with obtaining citizenship. It is easy to see that these problems are interrelated: Without citizenship or a residence permit, it is difficult to find a good job. Without a good job, in turn, one cannot purchase a home. In addition, non-citizens may have problems such as in obtaining land. In this case, we can apply the classic approach proposed by Rybakovsky, which states that the process of ethnic migration consists of three closely related stages. Specificity of the migration by members of the same ethnicity is manifested in all three stages. The first stage is preparation, shown mainly in the group or network nature of the formation of migration systems. In most cases, ethnic or migrant workers move to areas where there is a concentration of members of their community (family, relatives, etc.). This choice of location gives them the confidence to be accepted. [Remark 11][8]

## 7. Conclusion

Overall, results of the survey and interviews supported our hypothesis that obstacles to social integration of repatriates in Almaty include housing, employment, difficulties obtaining citizenship, and language barriers. Among these, housing was shown by both objective and subjective analysis as the greatest and most pressing issue, followed by unemployment. Given the large and increasing population of Kazakh repatriates as well as the economic benefits provided by their participation in the national economy, we have recommended that the government take steps to resolve the problems of social integration. Suggested measures include treatment of repatriates as a socially vulnerable group, providing

government support for housing and living, as well as regulations to promote the use of Kazakh over Russian and other languages as the main language of commerce.

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