The Migration System between Russia and Turkey: Past Trends and New Prospects (Ayşem Biriz Karaçay)

Coming into effect even before the collapse of the Soviet Union, but mostly following the dissolution of the communist regime, international migration flows between Russia and Turkey created a totally new and understudied migratory environment in the post-Soviet geography. The proposed project will contribute to previous studies by exploring the changing population movements from Russia to Turkey through the application of “the migration system theory”. According to this theory, a migration system emerges as a result of international migration flows which take place usually between countries that have close historical, cultural, or economic ties. To assess a system, the theory offers a wide perspective because it captures the interactions in the receiving country, sending country as well as the migrants as a whole. Thus, this approach provides a unified perspective which elaborates on basic theories of macro dynamics and policies and networks of both institutions and individuals and migrants themselves. This approach will open up a dynamic assessment of all actors involved in the migratory journey.

Focusing on the Turkish side of the migration system between Russia and Turkey, this Ph.D. researcher found that, subsequent to the collapse of the Soviet Union, new migrant profiles -the project-tied migrants, Turkish businessmen and small and medium-sized investors - have joined the migration flows from Turkey to Russia. The proposed project will examine the case of Russia as the other side of the system. Russia has largely contributed to the migration flows towards Turkey with diverse modes of mobility. Some of these have become a means of survival for the migrants in the post-Soviet economic crisis and thus played an important role in the shift towards a market-based economy.

The first intention of the project is to assess the migratory system between Russia and Turkey by referring to macro-, meso-, and micro-level analysis. Second, it attempts to explore the population movements between Russia and Turkey by investigating three main migrant categories: shuttle traders; circular migrants who work in various sectors (domestic service, sex/entertainment, hospitality/catering industries, textile, construction); other types of population movements like marriage migration and the increasing number of Russian tourists visiting Turkey. To do this, 65 semi-structured, in-depth and face to face interviews will be conducted in Istanbul and Antalya which are the main destination areas. Moscow is the area of origin and key informants. The fieldwork will be supplemented by other quantitative and qualitative data to be collected in Russia and Turkey, thereby providing a comprehensive basis for examining the topic.

Consequently, the project will make a significant contribution to Turkey-related migration studies in a number of ways: Firstly, although a number of studies have been conducted on the post-Soviet migration flows towards Turkey, their focus has been on specific flows and cases. The co-existence
of inflows and outflows of various migrant profiles, the recent changes in interactions and social networks that represent a new migration system between Russia and Turkey have largely been overlooked. Secondly, migration system theory, which provides a unified perspective, has not yet been applied in any of the Turkey-related migration studies. Finally, with its distinctive characteristics, the case of the Russian-Turkish migration system will yield findings on the diversity of the migrants’ social characteristics, motivation for migration, living/working conditions, their future plans, problems that they encounter and their perceptions of Turkey and will contribute to the existing information. In other words, the projects’ ultimate contribution will be to offer a diverse profile of Russian migrants and to explore the macro-, meso- and micro-dynamics of the complex workings of this new migration system.