Mixed migrant experiences, ethnic hierarchies, and geopolitical remittances: focus groups with returnees from Russia

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We examine migrant experiences in Russia, where migration has surged since the early 2000s, based on focus group with return migrants in Lviv, Ukraine, and Bishkek, Kyrgyzstan. Participants discussed their experiences in Russia, their motives for migrating, the impact of their experiences on their views of Russia, and their intentions to return to Russia again. They reported a diverse range of views and experiences, suggesting it is risky to generalize about labor migrant experiences in Russia. However, many indicated that their appreciation for the income they earned in Russia was the most salient aspect of their migration experience, and the economic benefits outweighed an assortment of more negative aspects they recalled. Their views of Russia are more positive as a result of their migration experiences, in part due to their perceptions of where they stand in Russia's ethnic hierarchies. Russia's reputation benefits from migration through what we call *geopolitical remittances*.

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Labor migration to Russia, primarily from other former Soviet republics, surged in the 2000s and has persisted despite Russia's economic struggles since 2014 (Rybakovsky and Ryazantsev 2005; Agadjanian, Nedoluzhko, and Kumskov 2008; Agadjanian, Gorina, and Menjivar 2014; Ryzantsev 2016; Schenk 2018). Although lacking historical precedent (Laruelle 2007), flows have been especially pronounced from the Central Asian countries (aside from Turkmenistan, which heavily restricts emigration), due to their much poorer economic conditions relative to Russia, their shared Soviet experience, Russian's lingua franca status in the region, the ease of travel from Central Asia to Russia, and the lack of visa requirements for entry (Ryazantsev 2016). Building on the massive immigration of ethnic Russians fleeing minority status in the new post-Soviet republics during the 1990s (Heleniak 2009), the recent labor migration has given Russia the fourth largest stock of migrants, with approximately 11.7 million foreign-born residents in 2017 (United Nations 2017, p.6).

In contrast to the voluminous literature on migrants in the United States and Western Europe, scholarship on migrants in Russia is only now gathering steam. Drivers of anti-migrant sentiment within the native-born Russian population (Gorodzeisky, Glikman, and Maskileyson 2015; Bahry 2016; Bessudnov 2016) and the Russian government's migration policies (Yudina 2005; Kubal 2016; Schenk 2018) are two popular topics. Studies of migrant experiences in Russia have been done by academics (Amirkhanian et al. 2011; Reeves 2012, 2013, 2015; Agadjanian et al. 2014; Agadjanian et al. 2017) and by investigative journalists and advocacy groups (Human Rights Watch 2009; Balmforth 2013; Kurachova and Chizhova 2013). This work paints a grim picture exploitation by employers, abuse and extortion by police and other authorities, impoverished living conditions and cramped housing, and harassment and hostility from the native-born population.

"Illegal" migrants – those who lack legal standing to remain in the country or who work without legal permission – face particular difficulties. Citizens of the Commonwealth of Independent States (CIS) can enter Russia without a visa for 90 days, but may not work without obtaining a permit or becoming a citizen. Requirements for obtaining work permits have varied over time, both in policy and in implementation (Balmforth 2013; Ryazantsev 2016; Schenk 2018). Most labor migrants from CIS countries—estimates typically converge around 80% (e.g. Balmforth 2013)—work without permission, due to government limits on the number of migrants who can be formally admitted, complicated procedures for obtaining legal status, and incentives for employers to hire undocumented migrants rather than undertake those procedures (Human Rights Watch 2009; Schenk 2018). The lack of legal status fosters pervasive uncertainty and precariousness, eliciting a variety of stratagems to avoid detection and deportation by the authorities and an extensive trade in fake documents and formal residential registrations (Reeves 2013, 2015).

In short, migrants – particularly those from Central Asia who lack legal status – are a highly vulnerable population. Localized immigrant surveys tend to confirm findings from qualitative research or investigative reporting: migrants in St. Petersburg are especially susceptible to HIV risks (Amirkhanian et al. 2011) and 34% of a sample of female Central Asian migrants surveyed in three Russian cities experienced ethno-racially motivated harassment in the previous 12 months (Agadjanian et al. 2017).

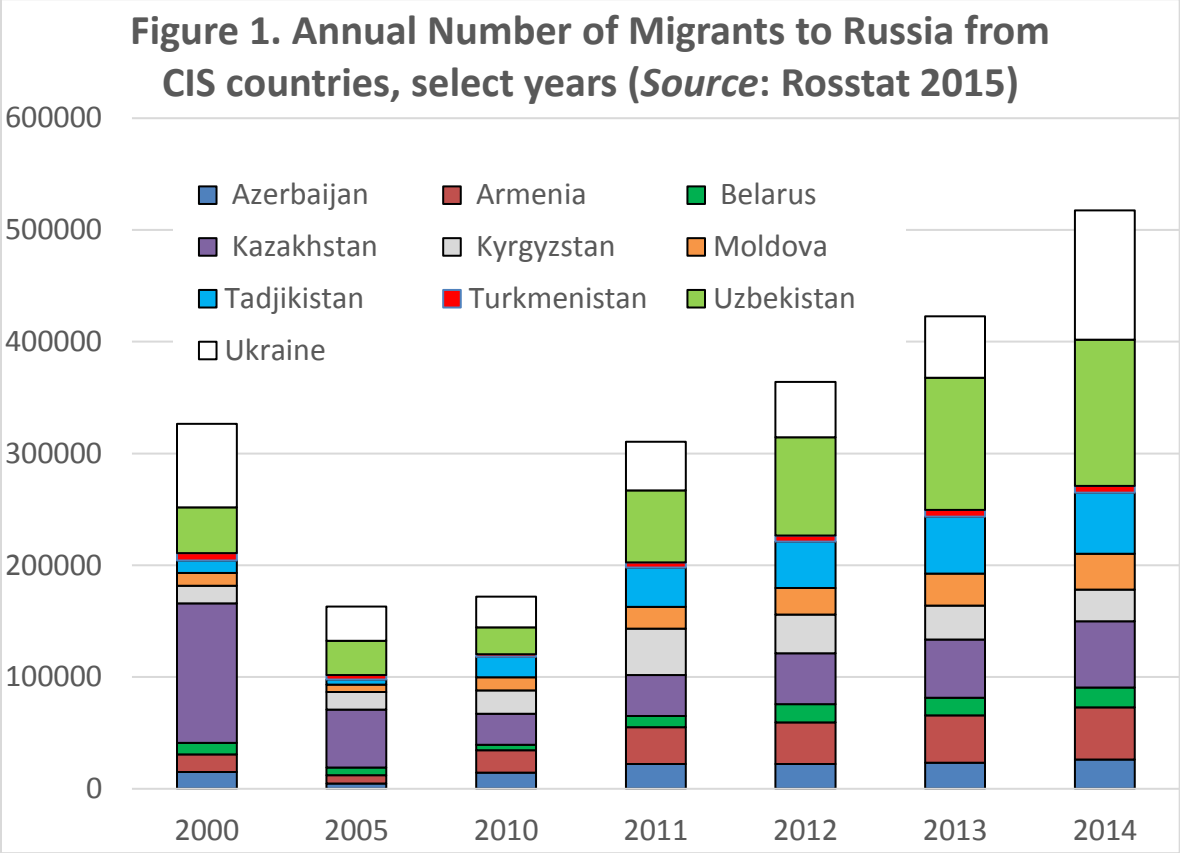
We provide a different perspective on the experiences of labor migrants while in Russia based on focus groups we implemented with return migrants in Kyrgyzstan and Ukraine. Our informants report a mix of both positive and negative experiences. They recognize how their ethnicity shapes their experiences, yet this can soften the impact of harassment. The economic

advantages of migration largely overshadow negative experiences in shaping their perceptions. Despite accounts of its poor treatment of migrants, particularly those from Central Asia, Russia's reputation in the sending countries benefits from what we call *geopolitical remittances:* positive features of the migration experiences that migrants send and bring home along with the money they earn abroad.

Research Questions

Further research on the experiences of migrants in Russia is needed to address three specific questions. First, how do experiences vary by region of origin? Most existing studies focus on migrants from Central Asia, whose experiences may differ from those from other regions. In particular, migration from Ukraine has been substantial, exceeding flows from Kyrgyzstan and Tadzhikistan (Figure 1) and accelerating after military conflict erupted between Russian-backed separatists and Ukrainian forces in eastern Ukraine's Donbass region in 2014. Yet, no studies specifically examine the experiences of Ukrainian migrants to Russia, a good case for comparison with Kyrgyz migrants, who potentially face particular difficulties because they differ from the ethnic Russian population in their culture, religion, and skin color (Agadjanian et al. 2014, 2017). Many do not speak Russian fluently. In contrast, migrants from Ukraine are phenotypically indistinguishable from ethnic Russians, they share cultural traditions and (Orthodox) religion, and they are highly likely to speak native-level Russian. However, the Donbass conflict and the associated demonizing of Ukraine in Russian media may have increased hostility toward Ukrainian newcomers among Russians. Kyrgyzstan's accession in 2015 to the Eurasian Economic Union (EEU), which Russia established to consolidate its economic ties with other former Soviet states by reducing trade and migration barriers, should have eased the process of legal migration from that country (Laruelle 2017). Comparing the

experiences of migrants from Kyrgyzstan and Ukraine sheds light on how country of origin and ethnic identity may influence the reception migrants receive in Russia.



Second, if conditions are as poor for migrants in Russia as many accounts indicate, why do high rates of migration there persist? Notwithstanding the relative strength of Russia's economy compared to Central Asia and Ukraine, tales from return migrants and the news media of mistreatment, horrible living conditions, and hostility should dampen enthusiasm for migration to Russia. Moreover, the Russian economy has stalled since early 2014 due to falling hydrocarbon prices on the world market, Western sanctions following the annexation of Crimea, currency devaluations, and persistent structural problems. Although the economies of neighboring countries have suffered too, Russia's economic woes should lower the incentives for enduring the hardships of migration, much as the United States' 2008 financial crisis led to lower

migration from Mexico (Villareal 2014). Nevertheless, migration to Russia from Central Asia has not waned (Ryzantsev 2016), suggesting that grim portrayals of migrant experiences Russia may be too one-sided. Our research explores the possibility that migrants, even from Central Asia, have a diverse range of experiences, both negative and positive.

Third, we consider a geopolitical dimension of migrant experiences in Russia unexplored in prior studies: how might they affect the larger reputation of Russia in the sending societies? As tensions between Russia and the United States have grown, Russian leaders have projected a strategic narrative portraying Russia as a preferable political and social alternative to "the West" (Gerber and Zavisca 2016). Through foreign media broadcasts, support for pro-Kremlin organizations in other countries, and a variety of policies and programs, the Russian government strives to enhance its "soft power" (Nye 2004) – its ability get its way in international political disputes via suasion and reputation rather than coercion. These efforts are pronounced in Central Asia, which Russian authorities consider within Russia's natural sphere of influence (Pannier 2015, Laruelle 2017). Negative migrant experiences could undermine the positive image Russia seeks to cultivate in these migrant-sending societies. We therefore investigate how migrant experiences in Russia translate into general perceptions of Russia when they return home.

Focus Groups

Our research questions call for empirical data on variations in the incentives and experiences of migrants, variations by national origins, and links between migration and views of Russia, its people, and its government. We addressed these topics in focus groups with 8-10 return migrants that we implemented in Kyrgyzstan and Ukraine as part of a larger study of

housing issues in four post-Soviet countries.[1] The first round of focus groups for the project we conducted in Kyrgyzstan in 2014 revealed the overwhelming influence of migration to Russia on social life there. We then decided to recruit return migrants for two (of six) additional groups in the capital, Bishkek, in November 2016. We also held, in July 2016, one focus group with return migrants from Russia in Lviv, a west Ukrainian city known for a pro-Western and Ukrainian nationalist orientation.

For these groups we incorporated questions on motives for migrating, experiences while abroad, and how migrant experiences shape views of Russia. Our local research partners (Crossroads Central Asia in Kyrgyzstan and SOCIS in Ukraine) helped us develop question guides, recruited participants, and provided a moderator who carried out the groups in the local languages. We observed the groups via live video feed, with simultaneous translation (where necessary) into Russian. The groups were recorded, and our partners prepared written transcripts (in Russian) of the recordings.

Focus groups offer a distinctive source of data on social topics. In contrast to in-depth interviews, the group format provides an interactive context in which respondents articulate views and share experiences, which mimics better than surveys or individual interviews the dialogic and semi-public character of much opinion formation that takes place outside of a research context. Participants react to one another in addition to the moderator's questions. They consider how others present perceive their answers, as people generally do when formulating opinions and narratives about their lives in real-world settings. Focus groups do have limitations: based on small samples, they cannot be generalized to larger populations with the same statistical

[1] The project was supported in part by the U.S. Army Research Laboratory and the U.S. Army Research Office via the Minerva Research Initiative program under grant number W911NF1310303. The views reported here do not represent those of the US Army or the US government.

reliability as surveys, and they do not allow the level of detailed probing and, possibly, openness that individual interviews can provide. Nonetheless, they offer a valuable source of data on topics such as migration experiences that can supplement insights gleaned using other methods.

Initial Kyrgyzstan focus groups: the importance migration to Russia

Although our first (2014) round of focus group in Kyrgyzstan did not specifically address international migration, it came up repeatedly. Two key themes emphasized in multiple groups merit highlighting. First, migration to Russia is a pervasive strategy, not always successful, that young men undertake to afford independent housing and marriage:[2]

> **Mirbek A:** These days many young men who take out loans in order to pay for a wedding and cannot figure out how to pay them back on their salaries travel to work in Russia, and the banks take away their mortgaged homes. There have been many such cases. I know some people who are afraid to go to their fiancee's home and put a ring on her finger because they don't have their own home." (Osh Kyrgyz)
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> **Aiym-ezhe:** Yes, now many young people have diplomas, but they all go to work in Russia. Every family has someone working in Russia. They can take out a mortgage and pay it off. For some young people that works well. (Village women)
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> **Iskander:** The majority [who can afford an apartment] are now working in Russia. I even went to Turkey and saw that the prices of apartments in Bishkek are higher that they are there. And now they are constructing multi-story buildings [here] and selling them very high **(**Osh Uzbeks)
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> **Nurlan**: Many people who are not able to build a house just get drunk. Then there are those who go to Russia, and it works out well for some of them but for others it doesn't work and they come home empty handed. I worked in Russia myself because I saw the situation clearly with my own eyes. (Village men)
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> **Nurzat:** To host a magnificent *toi*[3] of course you take out a loan if you don't have enough money. The bank lends you a huge sum and you have the feast for two days in the house, and we prepare the ransom for the bride…Or you hold the *toi* in a restaurant and spend a lot of money on it. And in order to pay off the loan you have to send the young couple to work in Russia with the words: "we spent so much money on you, now

[2] Here and below, we report our translations of direct quotations from the Russian-language transcripts, identifying the speaker by first name and the specific group. The quotations in this section come from two groups (with ethnic Kyrgyz and Uzbeks, respectively) conducted in the southern city of Osh, two groups (male and female) of villagers in the vicinity of Osh, and one of two mixed groups held in Bishkek.

[3] A *toi* is a huge feast that Kyrgyz traditionally provide for wedding guests, as Reeves (2012) describes at length.

> go earn it back." And as a result a lot of divorces happen. If they can't find work in Russia, various problems appear and the family falls apart….It is better to buy a one-bedroom apartment or the land you need to build a home. We shouldn't worry so much about what others think…We call it tradition, but everyone watches everyone else, observes what kind of *toi* they have. (Osh Kyrgyz)

Migration to Russia came up casually as an event affecting the lives of respondents, even if they themselves or their families had not migrated. Sanina (Osh Kyrgyz) recounted how after neighbors in her apartment building departed for Russia to work alcoholic and violent renters moved in, to her consternation. She also brought up a friend who received half the value of her ex-husband's house when he divorced her after marrying someone else while working in Russia.

The second major relevant theme is that migration to Russia drives strong pro-Russia sentiment. This came up following an open question about which countries Kyrgyzstan should work most closely with:

> **Gul'zat**: With Russia, because it is such a strong power.
> **Ulan**: Russia, our reliable partner from the Soviet Union, we lived together. We aren't risking anything.
> **Elina:** How many of our people go to Russia to work! My cousin is working there, he comes and goes. (Bishkek 2).

> **Nurlan**: I think [we should work with] Kazakhstan and with Russia. We now see how Uzbekistan is not giving us gas because we don't have good relations with them. Kazakhstan gives us flour. And our migrants work in Russia.
> **Talant**: Now Russia is feeding our people. Every family has someone who is now working in Russia.
> . . . .
> **Moderator:** If you had to choose just one government between these two states, which would it be?
> **All:** Russia.
> **Ulukbek**: Because many migrants are working in Russia and they are benefiting our country. We don't have very people working in America. (Village men)

> **Aiym-ezhe:** If our children didn't work in Russia, we would have no chance to develop. How difficult the years 1993-1994 were, when our children were not working in Russia! Russia improves our economy, she recently gave us three billion dollars for strengthening our borders. We decided to join the [Eurasian Economic] Union, I read recently, and once we join it will be good for our migrants. For that reason I supported joining the customs union. Let prices increase – they increase in any case. We grow potatoes, carrots, onions.

> We pay taxes. Before our children worked [there] without permission, without quotas. When we went there we only got registrations for 1-2 months. Now we won't have register, now they are prepared to provide us with social benefits, register our children in schools, get healthcare….
> **Akygul:** When we see conversations between Obama and Putin I personally admire Putin. Thank you Putin! Because he didn't leave us without work, he pays us wages. Thanks to him! He cares about Kyrgyzstan. (Village women)

Anticipating a theme we discuss below, Akygul also observed that Kyrgyz migrants have it better than other Central Asian migrants:

> **Akygul:** I worked in Russia for three years. It was difficult, very difficult. Now I am happy to be here, with my own [people]. In Russia citizens of Uzbekistan and Tadzhikistan are not treated like people. I'm happy that I am Kyrgyz. They ask for your passport when you are trying to find work in Moscow. If you show that you are from Kyrgyzstan then they pretty much are ready to hire you. But if you are from other countries they will only hire you as a janitor. (Village women)

Focus groups with return migrants

We turn now to the focus groups we conducted with return migrants in 2016. We present main themes that emerged regarding incentives and decisions to migrant, experiences while in Russia, perceptions of ethnic hierarchies, and impressions of Russia after returning home (geopolitical remittances).

Incentives and decision to migrate

Nearly all our Kyrgyz informants said they decided to go work in Russia because of inadequate jobs or wages in Kyrgyzstan. Cholpon's accountant job in Kyrgyzstan paid 2700 som (about $40) monthly, hardly enough to support her four children (Women)[4]. For some, labor migration was necessary to earn money for housing:

> **Nazira**: There are mortgages, but you need the down payment. In Kyrgyzstan you can't even save enough for the down payment. So you go abroad to earn money."(Women)

> **Talgat**: A lot of people here have houses, and almost all of them went to Russia in order to make money to buy those houses. If they worked here in Kyrgyzstan, how many years

[4] We identify the two return migrant groups in Bishkek by their gender composition: Women vs. Men.

> would they have to work before they could acquire a house? Out of desperation people have to go abroad to work, in order to buy a home or a car. If it were possible to do it in Kyrgyzstan, who would want to go abroad to work? It's not for nothing that people say: "in your homeland, even the sand is gold."(Men)

Dinara went with her husband to work in Russia and returned when they had enough to buy a home. Others needed for money to pay for children's education or for standard household expenses. Only one respondent mentioned a non-economic motive for going abroad:

> **Nursultan**: Because I am young, I went abroad in order to expand my horizons. And in order to pay for housing and food I had to work there. (Men)

Desperate economic need was a far more common motive:

> **Cholpon**: Everything depends on work. If there is no work, out of desperation you move to another country as a migrant. When you get to another country, inevitably you start to have problems. You especially have issues with documents. It's hard to find a job, and time is ticking away. (Women)

This last statement exemplifies how the Kyrgyz migrant respondents did not have jobs lined up prior to departure. They decided to travel to Russia first, then set about looking for work.

> **Zhyldyz**: I also went to "Piter" [St.Petersburg]. As soon as my child turned one, we left him and I went with my husband. Last year we went in May, and we returned here early this year. I went for two months. I worked seven days a week as a cashier and got 18000 [som]. It paid for our apartment, food, and travel costs. We sent some money home. We saved to buy a plot of land. In order to make a lot of money you have to stay there a long time and work. (Women)

In contrast, all eight return migrants in our Ukraine group originally went to Russia due to an opportunity or invitation that arose through personal connections. Aleksandr's brother got a construction job building the Olympic facilities in Sochi and invited him to join him. Aleksandr returned when the project ended but his brother still lives and works in Sochi. Ruslan's friends who worked in Russia contacted him because their firm needed an engineer with his skills; he has worked there on and off for five years under a formal labor contract. Oksana met friends of

friends visiting from Russia and they invited her to come work as a nanny for more pay than she earned as a schoolteacher in Lviv. She went for half a year. Nina's childhood friend who had moved to Moscow thirty years ago invited her to come care for her mother while she took a job in Germany; her stay lasted eight months.

Sasha's friend had gone with his father to do construction work near Moscow and told Sasha when his employer was hiring; he stayed for nine months, returning to Ukraine every 90 days to renew his passport stamp. He had to put down some money up front to get the job and make the trip, but the pay was good and he has no complaints about the experience (though he would not go again). The husband of Pavel's aunt had gone to work near Moscow and offered to get Pavel a job with his construction team; Pavel spent about two years there, commenting that "they always need construction workers." Tatiana's husband's cousin married a Muscovite, who, after befriending Tatiana at the wedding, invited her to Moscow to work as a nanny for a friend. She planned to go for year but ended up returning after seven months. Yura's situation was somewhat unusual: he went with his wife to deal with the paperwork to sell a share of an apartment near Moscow she had inherited. While living there he took up occasional jobs. It took them almost a year of wrangling, and they had to return every 90 days to renew their passport stamp.

Migration scholars have long pointed to how social networks foster migration (Massey et al. 1998). These stories all entail migrations undertaken in response to specific job offers or other opportunities presented by families or friends, not decisions to go to Russia then look for work after arriving. Ukrainian migration to Russia seems driven more by network-based opportunities than by an emerging tradition of traveling to Russia in pursuit of employment. In contrast, most of our Kyrgyz migrant informants first traveled to Russia (or Kazakhstan) and then looked for

work. This subtle difference in the decision process implies the Ukrainians' experiences would be more positive in terms of work conditions and salary because they responded to concrete job offer that a priori exceeded their reservation wage for migration, while the Kyrgyz respondents "took a plunge" in the hope of finding work at their destination.

Like the Kyrgyz, all the Ukrainians aside from Yura said their sole incentive in migrating was to make money, and they appreciated the higher salaries they earned in Russia. Some mentioned high housing costs in Lviv, where they generally would have preferred to remain, as a key motive to earn Russian-level wages. With no hope of help from family or the government, work abroad offered a chance to address housing needs.

Experiences in Russia

Our Kyrgyz migrant groups recalled difficult experiences in Russia:

> **El'mira**: I went abroad due to some difficulties in life. I went to Sverdlovsk…. I took the bus, with my husband. As soon as we got to the border at Kordaisk the problems started. The photo in my passport wasn't right, and they kept sending me from window to window. In the end, at the last one, they finally let me through. Then two days later we finally got to Russian customs—we got there at 9:00 pm and didn't get through until 1:30 am. They photographed all of us and our passports. They checked us one by one before letting us through. And so I finally made it to Sverdlovsk, eventually found work, and I worked. I worked as a janitor and a dishwasher. The Russians don't want to do the kind of work we do. You want to cry, but you are happy to get some money. You miss home. They were very difficult times for us [She starts to cry.] (Women)

They recounted problems with documents, the police, and intermediary firms:

> **Nurlan:** We went there illegally in 2014 to look for work, just when they decided to join the customs union. When we arrived, they told us we won't be able to work, we won't be able to take the Russian exam, and therefore we had to wait. We had problems with documents. (Men)

> **Cholpon**: I needed money to educate my children. We took off. We also had problems with documents, then there were problems getting work permits. From year to year we had to renew them every month, and it got more and more expensive. They wouldn't take Kyrgyz passports. You go to a company to get set up [with documents and a job]. The company takes half of your earnings. If your pay is 20000 [rubles] then you only get

10000, you have to give rest to the company. It is so hard, you crawl out of your skin in order to work. I was there for five years. (Women)

El'mira: If you run into the police twice a week that [costs] 2000 rubles. And when you get paid you feel the difference. You want to send money home, but you have to pay for lodging, food, and for the trip. Apartments are very expensive there. For example there were ten of us renting a two-bedroom apartment, five people in each room. You couldn't get gas, or take a shower. There were lots of problems. When things got very bad for us, we went to work in the fields. There, too, they recruited us to the work in the fields for one contract, then once we got there they gave us a different one, and at the end of the day you get paid even less than that. Ok, that's how it is. We decided to try working in the fields. But when nothing worked out we came back to Kyrgyzstan. (Women)

The crowded housing conditions that El'mira mentioned (see also Reeves 2015) came up repeatedly:

Nargiza: Twenty people lived in one apartment. The conditions were awful. It was horrible.
Cholpon: No matter where you find work, they won't provide you with housing. You have to find your own housing. You find an apartment and live with a lot of people, 30-40 people in one apartment…. Most people have fake registrations. If there are 30 people living in one house, they can't all be registered there. You have to pay money to someone who will take of registering you. We didn't even know where our [registered] addresses were. (Women)

Taalai: I lived in a room with 10 people.
Il'iaz: It's like that for everyone in Russia. (Men)

Despite the many hardships and challenges, most of the Kyrgyz migrants recall their experiences with a measure of ambivalence:

Cholpon: I have a secondary education. There is a lot I don't know, but I do okay for myself. I worked in the "black" market [illegally], and it was very hard. But in principle it was not so bad. My strength and health are spent. (Women)

Others know Kyrgyz migrants who chose to stay permanently in Russia:

Nargiza: You know, there are a lot of Kyrgyz in Russia. They get citizenship, and some of them don't even want to return. They say: Why should they return to Kyrgyzstan when there is nothing there for them? (Women)

Ryspek: Kyrgyz who work in good jobs don't want to return [to Kyrgyzstan]. They buy homes and stay [in Russia]. (Men)

One respondent recently visited Moscow for a vacation and observed much better living conditions for his relatives there than he had as a migrant:

> **Beken**: I just went to Moscow with my wife to rest for fifteen days and we saw how Kyrgyz are living there. We used to all lived in cramped quarters, now we see how they are living differently. They are living better in Moscow than in Kyrgyzstan. I used to send money to my brothers while living with 4-5 people in a room. Now I don't see that any more. I was there for fifteen days and we ate five lambs! We had a great time. (Men)

Continuing, Beken blamed some of the problems that young Kyrgyz migrants have in Russia on their own bad behavior: "I saw how our young men get drunk and fight with each other. There or in Kyrgyzstan, everything depends on how you behave. It doesn't matter whether we are in the Customs Union or not—relations with Russians depend on how you behave. If people behave well, Moscow is a great city. In 15 days I was not stopped by a single policeman." All of our Kyrgyz migrants to Russia said they would return if there was work for them there, except Cholpon, who at 49 said she was too old to work, adding: "I wouldn't let my children go [to Russia] if there was work here, but they have to go." Thus, the economic rewards of migration tended to outweigh the difficulties encountered in Russia.

The Ukrainians reported better work conditions and fewer difficulties. None experienced the hyper-crowded living conditions more typical for Central Asian migrants. Two lived on the construction sites where they worked, Sasha in "Spartan" conditions, Pavel in a converted train wagon he described as "popular" for migrant construction workers. Aleksandr lived in a "mansion" because his crew worked for an FSB officer: "We lived in an apartment that had been built for his daughter. We ate, we drank, we swam—the sea was right there. I went swimming then went back to work." Ruslan, the engineer with formal papers, lives with one or two roommates in hotel rooms or apartments that his firm rents for them as they move around the

country on projects, "decent conditions." The women in the group, all of whom did domestic work, lived with their employers in conditions they described as "normal."

The Ukrainians had differing impressions of the standard of living in Russia. All noted higher wages, but they disagreed about whether prices were the same as in Lviv or higher.

> **Ruslan**: Naturally in Moscow the pay is a lot higher, and you can allow yourself to live much better.
> **Yura**: But things are more expensive there. There is no fundamental difference. Moscow, Lviv, they are the same.
> **Ruslan**: I disagree, I disagree. Prices are the same everywhere.
> **Nina**: And there are a lot of Muscovites who try to build homes outside the city and move there. They are nice homes that have everything. And they move their parents into them, and in that way they solve their housing problems.…
> **Oksana**: That is they have the possibility to have two homes.
> **Tatiana**: I also know people who are living alone and they are building a house outside the city.

Like the Kyrgyz, the Ukrainians framed their experiences in practical terms: they went to Russia to work because the wages were good, they would prefer to enjoy the comforts of home in Lviv if they could make the same money, but nothing about Russia was so difficult as to stop them from returning when the need arose.

> **Aleksandr:** It's good to be home for a month or two, then you think you need to go back again.
> **Nina:** I don't know—I don't want to go back again, but I have to.
> **Sasha:** I like it better here, because over there I didn't see anything, didn't do anything, I just lived and did construction. When I came back here—I had to come back a few times [to renew passport stamp]—I saw my friends, lived a little. Over there I only slept, ate, and worked.
> **Oksana:** It's nice to come back here with the money I saved and live! That is a nice feeling!
> **Aleksandr:** When the money runs out I will go back.

However, more negative impressions of Russia also emerged when respondents reflected on how they feel in Lviv compared to Russia:

> **Moderator**: Do you feel you are more limited [back home]?
> **Nina**: Yes, more limited [in terms of economic opportunity].
> **Ruslan**: [Actually I feel] more free.

Moderator: More free, you like it here. It's like you come home, wherever it may be, and put on your slippers…
Oksana: Yes, of course.
Nina: It is my city.
Ruslan: And here I can walk around. If a policeman comes, no problem, I can keep my arms down and I don't have to show any documents. Here I can send him [to the devil].
Yura: [You can tell him,] "Why are you harassing me?"
Ruslan: Here there is nothing to fear.

On his last trip to Russia Aleksandr had troubles at the border; he was held there for three days until phone calls with his employer got him released. This experience made him not want to return:

Aleksandr: I am not going there anymore. The pay isn't that good anymore and you can't earn much. Nowadays they also look at you, if you are from Ukraine—especially from the West—and say "Oh, it's Bandera!" It's actually very dangerous. Because when I was working in the Olympic village I saw what they did to some Tadzhiks: thirty four guys, they just dumped them into the concrete and that was that. Very classy!
Moderator: Thirty four?
Aleksandr: Yes. So they wouldn't have to pay them for their work on the Olympics. They didn't want to pay them.

Ethnic hierarchies

Aleksandr's story of Tadzhik migrants dumped into concrete did not elicit any shock.[5] Perhaps Ukrainians find it unsurprising that Russian employers have such little regard for Tadzhiks that they think nothing of murdering them (under the guise of an "accident") in order to avoid paying them. They discussed further how Russians dislike Central Asians, particularly Tadzhiks and Uzbeks, and treat them as sub-humans.

Ruslan: They are not Slavs. [The Russians] don't like non-Slavs.
Aleksandr: They are dirty.
Ruslan: [The Russians] think they are dirty. That is, if at work we need to dig a hole in the ground, they don't ask a Ukrainian to come do it. They get a Tadzhik or Uzbek to do it. "Go dig the hole!"
Aleksandr: It's cheap slave labor.

[5] The story might have been made up. However, apparently 155 Tajik migrants died in Russia in 2012, "the victims of racist attacks, police brutality, dangerous working conditions and unsafe housing" (Keevil 2013). So an incident may have taken place. Perhaps it was an accident, embellished by Aleksandr into a deliberate murder.

Noting he was paid more than twice as much as his Tadzhik coworkers for the same work, Aleksandr curtly summed up how Central Asian are treated: "Cement." These accounts appear credible because Ukrainians working in construction might well observe such treatment of Central Asian migrants with whom they work. They are consistent with survey research indicating that Russians view migrants from Central Asia and the Caucasus more negatively than they view migrants from Ukraine and Moldova (Bessudnov 2016). Our focus groups indicate that migrants themselves recognize this ethnic hierarchy.

In fact, many argued that Russians view Ukrainians as no different from Russians, despite the current military conflict between the two countries:

> **Ruslan**: There is no discrimination [against Ukrainians] in Russia. I tell everyone that I am from Lviv, I even say that I'm Bandera[6]. But everyone just treats that as normal.
> **Yura**: *Khokhol*—you shouldn't be telling people that!
> ….
> **Nina**: Well, it's like we are brothers, we used to all be in the Soviet Union, and to call us migrants, it's only a thing that happened in recent years. We are, after all, brothers and sisters.
> **Oksana**: You shouldn't say that we are brothers…
> ….
> **Nina**: A lot of people say that the governments are to blame, that between the two of them they caused all this mess. But people, we are still just people.
> **Tatiana**: I heard [Russians] say they are afraid to come to Lviv: "what would they do to us there, wouldn't they kill us?"

Tatiana's comment is one example of less rosy depictions of Russian attitudes toward Ukrainian migrants. Pavel would like to return to Russia for more earnings, but feels it is too risky to go there without a job already lined up, especially "in light of the [political-military] situation." As the discussion continued, some recalled hearing things like "*khokhol* go home!" or being called "Bandera," while others had no such experiences: "maybe I just was lucky," Sasha

[6] "Bandera" is a reference to a Ukrainian nationalist insurgent against the Soviet Union, whom Russians often associate with fascism. *Khokhol* is a mildly derogatory term Russians use for Ukrainians.

suggested. They debated whether terms like *khokhol* and even "Bandera" were actually derogatory, as opposed to being neutral descriptive terms that Russians use for Ukrainians.

> **Ruslan:** As far as I know, they call us *khokhli*, it isn't necessarily an insult….I can say to them – "hey, *Moskal*, get over here," and he'll say "I'm not a *Moskal*, I'm a *katsap."*

In other words, pejorative labels are thrown around in the mode of playful, ironic joshing.

Multiple respondents characterized Russian views of Ukraine as distorted due to propaganda on TV and detected a condescending attitude, though not antipathy toward individual Ukrainians.

> **Ruslan**: They treat us normally, we get along fine. They don't understand what is happening in our country, but they sympathize with us.
> **Tatiana**: They feel sorry for us.
> **Aleksandr**: They see a lot on television that "hangs noodles on their ears" [i.e. deceives them, "pulls the wool over their eyes"]
> **Ruslan**: They see us as people. [The ones] who fight are Banderovtsy. They don't like our government. But the fact that we go over there to work, that's normal.
> **Oksana**: We're just normal people.
> **Ruslan**: We are Ukrainians, we are normal…. [They think] we are fools because we don't understand what's happening in our country. You try to explain to them what is actually happening, and they don't understand….
> **Tatiana**: They [criticize] our government, say that we live very badly because of our awful government.
> **Yura**: And they live so well there.
> **Aleksandr**: But they live just as we do.
> **Ruslan**: They don't live any better, but they think that in our country [conditions are worse].
> **Yura**: Their television is powerful propaganda.
> **Tatiana**: Yes.
> **Nina**: And some—I have actually heard this—say, "Putin is helping you, he wants your government to pay attention to you and change the laws, and when things improve in Ukraine then Putin will leave you alone."
> ….
> **Sasha**: Well, I wouldn't want to say that everything was great for me [in terms of getting along with Russians] but actually everything was pretty good. The guy who hired us, who I talked to a lot, we came to share the opinion that everything is bad there and they are also bad here. Even though he was the son of the mayor of a small town and thus part of the government, he also said that Putin is bad, and that we also have it bad here. But I think maybe I just happened to land in [an unusual situation] – that it's not like that everywhere.

The consensus: Russians and Ukrainians essentially get along well—as Ruslan put it, "getting Russians to hate Ukrainians is a serious challenge, same with getting Ukrainians to hate Russians"—despite some misconceptions and negative Russian propaganda. Only Sasha, who said repeatedly he gets along fine with Russians, reported an actual tense incident: some Russians overheard him speaking Ukrainian with his friends at a train station, cursed at them, and tried to provoke a fight; but it never came to blows. The war in Donbass creates awkward conversations, participants said that often Russians demur from discussing political issues. Some sensed that Russians had become more suspicious and distrustful, and they heard accusations that Ukrainians are too pro-American, but they did not feel lower than Russians in the ethnic hierarchy, like they perceived the Kyrgyz to be.

Our Kyrygz migrant respondents also were aware of their low status in Russia's ethnic hierarchy.

> **Nurlan**: In order to get this or that document you have to make requests, and when you make requests they treat you very rudely. They consider us to be inferior [*liudei vtorogo sorta*]. (Men)

However, at least in their own perceptions, Kyrgyz are higher in the hierarchy than Tadzhik and Uzbek migrants:

> **Cholpon**: They treat Kyrgyz better [than Tadzhiks and Uzbeks]. Many Kyrgyz are educated. They have at least 10 years of schooling. The ones from Tadzhikistan and Uzbekistan usually have only 6-8 years. There are also many Kyrgyz who studied at university. Those who speak the [Russian] language can become managers at work. You just need to get a Russian passport first.
> **Dinara**: Those who speak Russian do well. For us it's the same as it was 10 years ago. In Uzbekistan they stopped speaking Russian 20 years ago. But [the Russians] have good relations with Kyrgyz. At first [the Russians] get us all mixed up, we all just look like Muslims to them. But then after they hear us speak they know who is who. (Women)

> **Nurlan**: We [Krygyz] are hard-working. Also, there's language. If [Russians] ask you a question and you answer intelligibly they won't mess with you. But when they ask Uzbeks and Tadzhiks for their passports they don't understand the question, and [the

police] start to harass them. We are a more literate people, therefore [the Russians] relate to us better. (Men)

These comments indicate that Kyrgyz take some pride in the apparent superiority of their reputation compared to other Central Asians, even as they recognize their generally low place in the ethnic hierarchy. This perception may or may not be accurate: Agadjanian et al. (2017) report that Kyrgyz migrant women experience *more* harassment in Russia than their Uzbek and Tadzhik counterparts. Regardless of its accuracy, the important point is that the common perception logically mitigates potential outrage at ethno-racially motivated mistreatment.

Geopolitical remittances

Their perceived advantages relative to other Central Asians may help explain why, despite difficult experiences there, the Kyrgyz migrants view Russia with warmth and admiration. Russia is the country they say Kyrgyzstan should work with most closely:

> **Ryspek**: We have a lot of migrants in Russia.
> **Taalai**: Thanks to Russia our economy is growing. We are working [there] and sending money to our relatives. Some pay taxes, some build homes thanks to Russia, and it is helping the budget of our government. (Migrant men, 2016, p.25)

In contrast to the more ambivalent views expressed in our Ukrainian group, the Kyrgyz are impressed by Russia's economy and standards of living:

> **Nargiza**: The Russian economy is better than ours by an order of magnitude. If you, say, compare our standard of living to theirs, it is like earth and sky." (Migrant women 2016, p. 23)

> **Ryspek**: Russia is now getting out of the crisis. Russians are living very well now, they have a lot of money. For example, there are Russians who come on vacation to Issyk-Kul.
> **Talgat**: Compared with the 1990s Russia is doing a lot better. Things are especially good in the cities. In a lot of the rural areas they live like we do. (Migrant men, 2016, p.24)

Although they missed relatives and friends in Kyrgyzstan while abroad and felt an attachment to their homeland, in some ways it compares unfavorably to Russia:

> **Nurlan:** When you fly home you immediately sense that [Bishkek] is dirty, there are no ethics on the street, people throw cigarettes everywhere. That doesn't happen in Russia.
> **….**
> **Talgat**: Outside the country Kyrgyz are more close-knit [*bolee splochennye*]. We were eight buddies [in Russia], we always ate together, went everywhere together. In Kyrgystan we have started to grow apart. (Migrant men, 2016, p.24)

Dinara and Nargiza (Women) admired the superior work requirements, training opportunities, and better maternity benefits they had observed in Russia.

Our lone case of a migrant's experience translating into anti-Russian sentiment emerged not in our migrant groups, but in another 2016 Bishkek group consisting of women who live in *novostroiki.*[7] After a discussion touting the merits of Kyrgyzstan working with Russia and rejecting the United States, Rano took issue: "I, for one, am against Russia." She then described how her husband had been treated respectfully and helped by the police while working in Germany, juxtaposing bad experiences he had had in Russia. "Russians always think we do not belong. They treat migrants the same way. Look, we joined the Customs Union, we still have no rights. On the internet I read how a girl tried to demand her rights and they dragged her out and beat her. Now she is an invalid. That doesn't happen in Europe." Although only one example, Rano's comments suggest that Kyrgyz with experiences in other destinations may have a different perspective on Russia than those with experiences in Russia alone.

Our Kygyz informants noted some limited positive changes resulting from Kyrgyzstan's entry in the EEU. Dinar and Cholpon (Women) said it had become easier to get papers, but not necessarily a job. Il'iaz was most upbeat:

> **Il'iaz:** I recently came back. In Russia conditions have gotten better. For example, now to get a registration you pay 3000 and can walk around in peace. They are hiring, and stores and so forth are taking on people on a legal basis; they register in your work book [*trudovaya knizhka*]….If you get sick you can buy insurance for 500 som for three months. The ambulance will come for you, you can get a check-up, give birth in a maternity ward, and people who get married can celebrate. Everything is good. (Men)

[7] Squatter settlements on the outskirts of Bishkek.

Others were skeptical about a change in attitudes of Russians:

> **Talgat**: You are [still] only treated well if you have documents. It's just like it was before, in terms of relations with Russians.
> **Beken**: That's right.
> **Talgat**: Relations are just like before, there is no difference. (Men)

The migrants themselves shared the assessment we heard in many other groups we have conducted in Kyrgyzstan that migration to Russia is essential for the country's well-being:

> **Cholpon**: Things have changed [in Kyrgyzstan], of course. For example, you go to a village and you see that new houses have been built. It has gotten better. Then you think, maybe it's not so bad here. But they are built using money from Russia.
> **Nargiza**: Probably every family [in Kyrgyzstan] has relatives in Russia. Therefore, I think that they use the money from Russia to build houses here. For example, in *novostroiki* they are building houses using money their children are earning in Russia. They send the money here and [their parents] build.
> ….
> **Cholpon**: You can tell the people here who can't go to Russia because they are the ones who cannot pay for clothes, shoes, and food for their children. Of course they are the ones who cannot go to Russia. (Women)

The warmth and gratitude our Kyrgyz respondents expressed for Russia differs from the ambivalence among the Ukrainians. Nina said she realized while in Moscow that Ukrainians are a cheerful people, while Russians are grim and grouchy. She also said Russians work very hard – they "survive on conserves because they don't have time to cook" – to which Oksana replied that so many Ukrainians are in Russia doing domestic work because Russian women have no time to cook and clean because they are working. The two women also characterized Russians as closed and distant, hard to talk to. We noted the impression that Russians stubbornly cling to their opinions (for example, their views of Ukraine) and will not change their minds when confronted with alternative information. This characterization seemed to be a polite way of saying that Russians are especially gullible in believing government propaganda despite its occasional absurdity—as in a widespread report in Russian media that radical nationalists crucified a young

boy in Lviv. Several respondents bemusedly described Russians' pride in their military equipment and mocked the Russians' confidence that they could stand up to the United States in a war.

> **Ruslan**: They are somehow seriously preparing for war. Yes, their propaganda really is leading them to war. They say they don't want to fight, but all their billboards are covered with tanks and machine guns and declare that they will be victorious.
> **Yura**: "If World War III starts I will go fight the Americans." That's what a [Russian] guy with two university degrees told me!
> ….
> **Ruslan**: Yes, always everything against America. "Our planes are better."
> **Aleksandr**: And they will immediately fall from the sky.

Overall, then, Ukrainian migrants perceived their relationships with Russians as positive, if rendered somewhat problematic by anti-Ukrainian propaganda and resulting suspicions on the Russians' part.

Although by-and-large the Ukrainian focus group participants said they had no problems in Russia, they did describe fears of getting stopped by the police and recounted having to regularly pay bribes to officers to avoid scrutiny of their legal status (all except Ruslan and Yura were working in the country without legal permission).

> **Tatiana**: It seems to me that if you are illegal you feel unsafe, and without any acquaintances it can be tough. And everywhere you go, you have to be careful: nobody can hear you speaking Ukrainian. Better not say anything if you don't have to. There are good people, and also…
> **Yura**: …you can get unlucky.
> **Sasha**: If it were like that for me, I wouldn't go there.
> **Ruslan**: It's awful there [for illegal migrants]. If any policeman stops you, that's it – if you have money, one or two thousand, to give him, he will leave you alone. But if not, you are immediately heading home. And if you end up in the FMS then it's all over – pay or don't pay, it's guaranteed that you are heading home, deportation. And they'll even make you work until you earn 5000 to pay for the trip home.
> **Aleksandr**: One week, one week you have to work, it's like a fine.
> **Ruslan**: And they drop you off at the border, and how you get home from there is not their problem.
> ….
> **Aleksandr**: I could move around the city [Sochi] freely and go to the sea because we were working for a general, it was like a kind of *propusk*. To be honest we felt fine.

> **Moderator**: And how were other Ukrainian migrants there doing?
> **Aleksandr**: Well, it was hard for them. I worked… [G]uys from Donetsk there, yes, guys from Luhansk--it was easier for them. Once all the mess started, they could do whatever they wanted, nobody bothered them. But if you were from the West, like one guy from Volyn—it wasn't so good. From time to time a car would drive up and they would just look at you, well, making it clear that you had better pay up. Give them 1000 rubles per person and then all would be fine. There were about 20 or 30 of us, and every month a cop would come. Then we got to know him, he was not a bad guy.

Half the group will not go back to Russia because they feel vulnerable there:

> **Pavel**: It's not so much a problem [with documents]; it's that it's getting a bit dangerous….For the sake of my own security. That is, it was getting to feel a bit uncertain.
> **Moderator**: What made you feel that it was getting risky? You guys were saying before that everything there is "normal, normal."
> **Pavel**: Well, everything is normal, but what if somebody decides they want to [do something to me], you know the government is at war, so…
> **Aleksandr**: You go there to work and you end up buried there.
> **Pavel**: Is it worth taking the risk for a few dollars? If they can just, as Aleksandr says, just encase you in cement [*prosto zabetonirovat'*] and nobody [cares or does anything] there? Who would even look for you?
> **Oksana**: You don't have any certainty about tomorrow.

But the other half of the group had no such reservations. As Sasha said: "I would go back, I liked everything there. It seems to me that propaganda is also working on us [Ukrainians]." Consistent with this last point, Sasha, Tatiana, and Oksana all reported they had been harangued by acquaintances in Lviv—called "Moskal" and the like—for having worked in Russia.

A different picture of life as a migrant emerged from the Ukrainian group, compared to the experiences of the Kyrgyz migrants and the dire portraits of the situation of Central Asian migrants in journalistic and scholarly accounts. The most salient feature of their experience was the good wages they earned. Aside from occasional insults and arguments over geopolitics, they tended to get along with the Russians they encountered. They felt increasingly wary of the police and perceived they were less welcome after the Maidan events of early 2014. But fears for their safety were more tied to their lack of legal status than to their ethnic identity. Overall, they

tended to see their experiences in Russia as "normal." Considering the state of military conflict between Russia and Ukraine, the encounters that they reported having with Russians are strikingly benign. Yet they were well aware that Russia can be an very inhospitable place for migrants – especially those from Central Asia—and that lacking legal permission to work put them in vulnerable position, subject to having to pay bribes. In sum, their migration experience, while hardly a picnic, was far from an ordeal.

Conclusion

Our focus groups confirm some aspects of migrant experiences in Russia emphasized by others (Human Rights Watch 2009; Reeves 2013, 2015; Agadjanian et al. 2017). Raising money—often specifically to acquire housing—is the major, if not sole incentive for migrating. Many migrants encounter police harassment and extortion, difficult living conditions, mistreatment by employers and intermediaries. These problems are particularly pronounced for Central Asians and for those lacking legal status in Russia.

We also uncovered aspects of migrant experiences that have received less attention. Migrants have diverse experiences, and some establish long-term roots in Russia. Difficult migrant experiences are often offset by the money to be made, as evinced in the widespread interest in returning there. Thus, overall migrant experience are a mixed bag. Kyrgyz migrants themselves report some improvements in conditions, if not necessarily in the attitudes of the local population, following Kyrgyzstan's entry to the EEU.

The experiences of Ukrainian and Kyrgyz migrants differ. The Ukrainians report fewer of the problems that the Kyrgyz routinely encounter, though they too face difficulties associated with the lack of legal work permits and residency status. This could, in part, reflect different selection mechanisms: our Ukrainian informants went to Russia following invitations from

contacts for a specific job, whereas the Kyrgyz first decided to migrate then left for Russia without a job lined up in advance. Intuitively, the different conditions of the original decision to migrate would tend to produce more positive experiences and fewer struggles for the Ukrainians. Also, the Ukrainians sense they are received more favorably than Central Asians by locals and officials, regardless of the war-like situation between Russia and Ukraine. At the same time, the Kyrgyz migrants believe they are treated better by Russians in comparison to their counterparts from Tadzhikistan and Uzbekistan, which may help mitigate the impact of bad experiences.

Despite reports of poor treatment, harassment, and difficult living conditions experienced by migrants from Central Asia, massive labor migration to Russia appears to bolster the reputation of Russian within the Kyrgyz population. This is not to dispute the negative accounts of migrant hardships, but to note that they only capture part of the picture. Kyrgyz migrants the benefits migration to Russia brings them and their communities. The difficulties they experienced hardly factor into how they view Russia. Tensions with Russians may be rising, but Ukrainian migrants nonetheless do not generally feel unwelcome in Russia; instead, they believe they are on the same par as Russians in the ethnic hierarchy, and their interactions with Russians, if anything, reduce enmity toward them. Russia has not so far suffered any cost to its reputation as a result of its treatment of migrants, even those without legal status. From the perspective of Russian soft power further liberalization of Russia's migration policies and better enforcement of regulations would likely yield even more dividends in the form of geopolitical remittances. It would also, to be sure, help Russia address looming labor shortages.

Our focus groups gave us new insight on migrant experiences in Russia that merit further development and testing in future studies. By interviewing return migrants rather than those abroad, we gain perspective on how migrant experiences relates to attitudes toward the

destination country back home. In addition to more focus groups tailored specifically to address migrant experiences, including some in the host society, large-sample surveys of return migrants would help test the generalizability of our focus group findings and support the systematic study of factors that help account for the diverse experiences of migrants in Russia, as well as the potential longer-term ramifications of massive labor migration for Russia's reputation in the major source countries. Work of this nature would allow scholars to bring Russia, an important case that has not yet received its due from migration scholars, into the lively academic literature on migrant incorporation in all its dimensions. For example, there are numerous potential parallels between the ethnic hierarchies within Russia that variably affect the experiences of migrants from different countries and the situation faced by migrants to the United States. Finally, government officials in the both Russia and the United States might do well to consider the potential impact of anti-migration policies in terms of lost geopolitical remittances.

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