

The Tenacity of Transnational Networks: Vietnamese Migrants in the Soviet Union and Russian Federation

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Extended Abstract

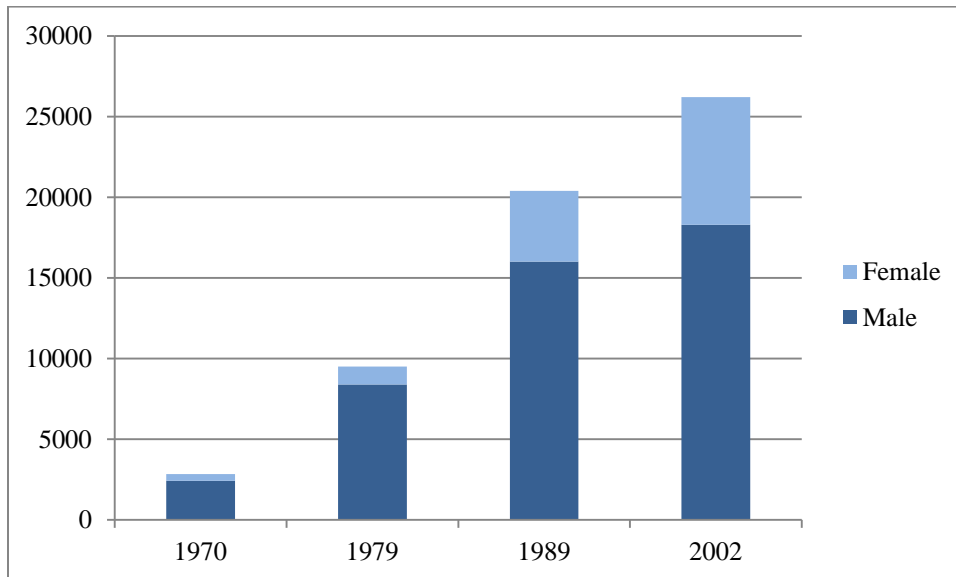
Ample research across numerous settings points to the importance of networks in facilitating human migration, but as yet there is not clear consensus regarding how networks emerge or the way in which networks maintain their ability to adapt to changing structural contexts. In this paper we explore how networks between Vietnam and the Russian Federation were established, focusing on the roles played by short-term state sponsored labor exchanges and the Soviet provision of higher education opportunities for promising Vietnamese youth. We then trace the trajectory and composition of labor migration from Vietnam to the Russian Federation in order to explore how migrant networks have adapted to large scale structural changes at both the destination (the newly independent Russian Federation) and origin (the newly reunited Vietnam). Our findings contribute to theories of network emergence, adaptability and destination resilience by highlighting the importance of flexible social capital within networks, over the importance of specific insight or influence into structural context.

The conclusion of the Vietnam War in the mid 1970s and the emergence of a communist regime in North Vietnam coincided with areas of labor shortages within the Soviet Union. By negotiating labor contracts for Vietnamese labor, Soviet officials could simultaneously highlight their role in assisting the development of the new regime while accessing large supplies of inexpensive, and presumably strictly monitored, short term labor (Blagov 2000, Ginsberg 1989). Beginning with modest numbers of Soviet contract workers in the late 1970 (10,000 one year labor contracts in 1979), the number of Vietnamese workers on official Soviet contracts within the Russian Federation alone grew to nearly 100,000 by 1987 (Riazantsev 2007: 143). Educational migrants were far fewer in number, but by 1980 there were an estimated 3,000 Vietnamese students enrolled on scholarship to Soviet Universities. Both students and contract workers found means of remaining in the Soviet Union after the completion of their work or

studies. As most workers and students were male, marriages to local women provided a means of extending their stay within the Soviet Union or Eastern Europe (Williams and Balaz 2005: Mullerova 1998). Alternatively, migrants could attempt to secure employment providing local residency permits.¹ Between 1970 and 1989, the number of ethnic Vietnamese resident in the Russian Federation increased eight-fold. In the late 1980s, increasing press reports highlighted the growing number of unregistered Vietnamese worker in Russian cities such as Tomsk, Yekaterinburg, Nizhni Novgorod (Gorki) and Moscow, challenging the dominant “scientific management” approaches to migration dominant at both destination and origin.

After the collapse of the Soviet Union in 1991, the process of state administered labor contracts between the Russian Federation and Vietnam grew increasingly decentralized, often falling to the level of individual enterprises. Funding for students from Vietnam to attend Russian Universities also declined. However, migration into the Russian Federation from Vietnam persisted, with increasing numbers of ethnic Vietnamese (men and women) becoming permanent residents, as seen in Figure One.

Figure 1. Number of Ethnic Vietnamese Resident in the Russian Federation, Census Years

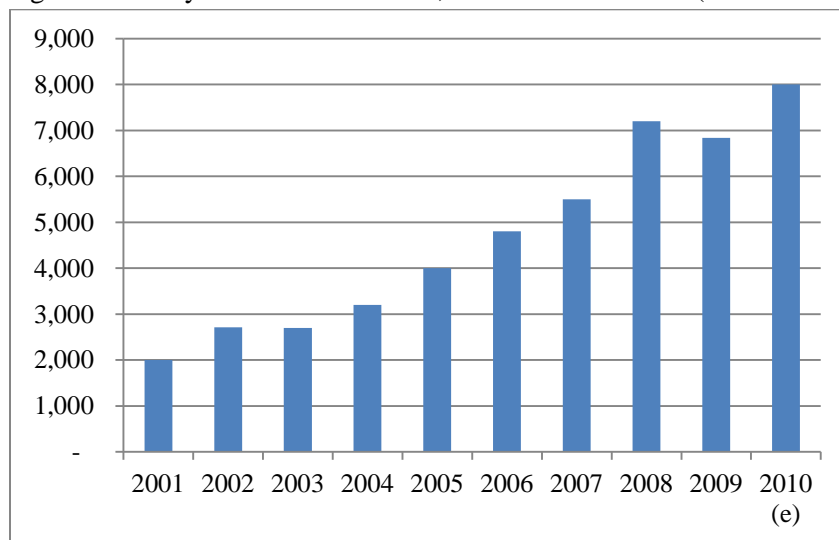


Rosstat.

¹ Such positions were typically in high skilled technical fields, particularly those related to military research, or extremely low skill, poorly paid positions such as building security and cleaning

The reunification of North and South Vietnam, and reorientation towards a market economy has coincided with increasing reliance upon migrant remittances for household budgets. As seen in Figure Two, Vietnam received an estimated 8 billion US dollars in remittances in 2010, roughly 7% of the country's GDP. In the past decade, possible destinations for Vietnamese labor migrants have broadened considerably, yet many laborers continue to seek employment in the Russian Federation. Significant numbers of Vietnamese labor migrants continue to be found in Yekaterinburg, Nizhny Novgorod, Tomsk, and Moscow. Using secondary sources and a survey of labor migrants in the Russian Federation² (going into the field in October 2010), we will examine the sources of flexibility and resilience that have enabled these migration networks to continue in spite of dramatic structural changes at origin and destination.

Figure 2. Yearly Remittance Inflows, Vietnam 2001-2010 (US \$ Million)



Source: World Bank Remittances Factbook 2011.
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² This survey, the first multi-site investigation of labor migrants in the Russian Federation, utilizes a modified RDS approach, with multiple initial seeds within the Vietnamese communities in Yekaterinburg and Nizhni Novgorod. The core questionnaire includes a modified migration history and detailed information on the migration process.

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