Internal Migration from a Russian Republic: The Everyday Experiences of Kalmyk Migrants in Moscow

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Abstract

This paper recounts the lived experiences of internal migrants in the Russian Federation, specifically those who have moved from the Republic of Kalmykia in the country’s southwest to the capital of Moscow. Recounting exposure to racism and xenophobia, challenges in the housing and employment markets, and negotiating an evolving city, informants offer grounded interpretations of migration within contemporary Russia. In part, the conversations that inform this paper focus on the everyday experiences of Kalmyk migrants in Russia and in turn aim to fill a gap in the existing academic literature on internal migration in Russia. Most migration in Russia is internal, yet we know relatively little about the diverse nature of the experiences of these migrants at their destinations.

Keywords

internal migration – lived experience – Kalmykia – Russia – Moscow
Saglara¹ is a Kalmyk woman who works as a financial analyst at the Moscow headquarters of Sberbank, one of Russia’s largest banks. The office where she works has rows of desks where others in similar roles work, not all of whom know each other. The space is off limits to the cleaning personnel, who are mainly migrants from Central Asia. One day Saglara left the office for lunch and returned only to be stopped by a Russian woman, another analyst, who asked Saglara how she entered the office space to which the cleaning personnel do not have access. To the Russian woman’s surprise, Saglara calmly answered that she is also an analyst. Saglara moved to Moscow from Kalmykia, an ethnic republic in southwest Russia. Her experience underscores the challenges that non-ethnic Russians who migrate away from their home republics face in everyday life in the Russian capital.

Despite the importance of internal population movement for Russia’s economy and society, such movement is an understudied topic in the academic literatures in both Russia and the west (White 2007). Labor migration regimes that have emerged are both short-term and long-term in duration, and push and pull factors combine and interact to influence migration decisions. Internal movement within Russia, whether forced displacement from the wars in Chechnya or temporary labor migration from other North Caucasus republics that follows a pattern similar to migration from the former Soviet republics of the near abroad, has altered the country’s demographic balance both in receiving and sending locales (Vendina et al 2007, White 2007, 2009, Holland and Eldarov 2012). Between 2005 and 2017, about 90% of all migrant arrivals were internal to the Russian Federation; moreover, these moves increasingly occurred across federal okrugs over the same period, rising to more than half (50.2%) by 2016 (Sotsial’nyi Bulletin’ 2018). Most migration in Russia is internal and is increasingly occurring beyond rather than within the boundaries of the country’s federal okrugs.

This article crafts an in-depth picture of migration experiences for ethnic Kalmyks in Moscow, and in turn aims both to redress the lack of scholarship on Kalmyk migration and to contribute to research on internal migration in Russia as carried out by national minorities. In particular, the paper aims to interpret the migration experience – including duration, reception, and integration – for Russia’s national minorities as they move beyond the borders of their home republics. Drawing on 53 in-person interviews conducted in Moscow and Kalmykia by the paper’s lead author in January and February 2020, we identify

¹ All names used in the paper are pseudonyms. Quotes are taken from the interview transcripts and translated into English by the paper’s authors.
and interpret a set of key themes articulated by our interview subjects. For Kalmyks, migration out of the republic is motivated by economics, employment opportunities, and education, among other factors. In the Russian capital, the experiences of Kalmyk migrants are complex. Racism is one thread commonly noted by our interlocutors, and affects many aspects of Kalmyk migrants’ lives, although such experiences are distinct depending on gender, social status, cultural capital, and citizenship status. This article narrates and analyses the subjective experiences of Kalmyk migrants and does not set for itself the goal of proving or disproving the objectivity of their claims. Rather, the paper details how internal migration from the Republic of Kalmykia is variously experienced by those who have moved to the Russian capital in the years since 1991, with emphasis on the daily lives and migration motivations of one minority group within Moscow’s diverse ethnic landscape.

1 Internal Migration from Kalmykia

Kalmykia, in Russia’s southwest bordering the North Caucasus and the Caspian Sea, is one of Russia’s national republics. Its titular population are Kalmyks, a people of Oirat-Mongol origin who settled in the area during the first half of the seventeenth century. In 1771, the Kalmyk polity was abolished, and the Kalmyk lands were subordinated under the Astrakhan guberniya (Terbish 2022). Russification occurred during the Soviet period, in part the product of the group’s exile en masse to Siberia and Central Asia during World War II; today, the majority of Kalmyks speak Russian as their mother tongue, have Russian names, and are acculturated to Russian traditions and cuisine (see both Terbish and Guchinova, this issue). Importantly, the Kalmyks preserved their connection to Buddhism and Buddhist practice despite Soviet policies of forced secularization (Holland 2015; see also Ulanov et al, this issue).

Kalmykia’s population is 267,756 according to 1 January 2022 statistics. Per the 2021 Russian Federation census, ethnic Kalmyks comprised 62.5% of the republic’s population; Russians were the second largest group at 25.7%. (The absolute number of Russians living in Kalmykia declined by approximately

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2 This article does not aim to compare the experiences of Kalmyk migrants with those of ethnic minorities from other parts of Russia or migrants from Central Asian states, although it mentions “Central Asian migrants” several times to whom some of our Kalmyk informants compared themselves in their narratives, which elicits touching upon this topic.

3 For Russia’s population as of 1 January 2022 by federal subject and municipality, see: https://rosstat.gov.ru/storage/mediabank/chisl_%D0%9C%D0%9E_SITE_01-01-2022.xlsx.
20,000 during the 2010 to 2021 intercensal period.) Kalmykia today ranks at the bottom of economic indicators for the Russian Federation. Key sectors include agriculture and animal husbandry, although there is some oil production in the region’s southeast near the Caspian Sea. The leading economic sectors in the republic today are consistent with the Soviet period; however, the labor market has been transformed because fewer people are employed in these sectors now in comparison to before 1991. These changes are the result of decreased production capacity, low wages, poor facilities, perception of these occupations as low prestige, and a lack of infrastructure in rural areas, among other factors (Namrueva 2019). These conditions have been further exacerbated by climate change, with prolonged droughts, sandstorms, and harsher summers decimating crops and livestock. In turn, many households adopt a wide range of livelihood strategies, which include moving to more prosperous Russian regions or sending family members to such places (White 2009). Not all people migrate solely because they are attracted by higher wages or the availability of jobs; many have other considerations when undertaking migration, including finding more interesting work, building a career, and attaining self-fulfillment. Due to strong family ties and a clan-based social order, networks play an important role in the daily lives of Kalmyks and these connections carry over into migration regimes.

Given the region’s economic weakness, we would expect high numbers of economically motivated migrants from Kalmykia, although official data is either unavailable or unreliable (Andrienko and Guriev 2004, Eldyaeva and Kovanova 2018). Anecdotally, during the period from the early 2000s up to the present about one third of Kalmykia’s entire population – about 90,000 people – are supposed to have left the republic for other parts of Russia. Internal migration by Kalmyks in Russia is mainly centripetal, with the bulk of migrant workers living and working in Moscow, Moscow oblast’, or St. Petersburg and its environs. This pattern echoes broader trends that developed soon after the breakup of the Soviet Union; since the mid-1990s, Russia’s capital and its surrounding region have absorbed a large proportion of domestic migrants (Ioffe and Zayonchkovskaya 2010). Today, Moscow is home to the largest Kalmyk community outside the republic; anecdotally, estimates between 20,000 to 40,000 people are widely accepted in the Kalmyk community (the larger

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4 For example, at the beginning of 2022 Kalmykia’s population was the most indebted in Russia, having the largest bank loan debt per person of working age; see: https://news.ru /economics/kalmykiya-nazvana-samym-zakreditovannym-regionom-rf/.

5 It is difficult to know precisely how many Kalmyks live in Moscow because of the temporary, and unregistered, nature of the migration in which they engage. The 2021 Russian census reported approximately 4,000 Kalmyks living in Moscow, one-tenth of our upper estimate.
number is roughly a quarter of the ethnic Kalmyk population in Kalmykia proper. Other important destinations include Chukotka, Khanty-Mansi, and Yamal-Nenets autonomous okrugs, where Kalmyks frequently find employment in state-sponsored jobs in education, healthcare, and law enforcement, as well as in the natural resources and commercial sectors (Badmaeva 2021, Oparin 2018).

The official line of Kalmykia's government on outmigration is that it is mainly driven by economic considerations; as such, it is a negative that depletes the republic's workforce and hence contributes to the republic's underdevelopment. Besides economic and demographic concerns, outmigration is often blamed in the government's rhetoric as negatively affecting Kalmyk culture, for many migrants – especially the younger generation – are believed to neglect their traditions and the Kalmyk language when outside of the republic. However, outmigration from Kalmykia has more complex causes and effects.

The literature on cross-border migration suggests that higher levels of socioeconomic development in sending countries or communities may lead to more migration as people secure the means and resources to undertake a move. On the other hand, brain drain is accompanied by brain gain (Stark et al 1997), when migrants contribute to their communities of origin by bringing new technologies, investment, skills, and ideas, in turn changing local attitudes and political dynamics (Massey et al 1999). Positive effects are discernible in the Kalmyk case, as well. For example, concerns about young Kalmyks neglecting cultural traditions and language when outside the republic are overstated. Kalmyk diasporas in Moscow and St. Petersburg organize sporting events, celebrate national holidays, and hold Kalmyk language classes. In this sense, outmigration may reinforce identity and have a positive effect on the preservation of culture and language. In addition to sending remittances back to the republic, Kalmyk migrants also fund small entrepreneurial projects in Kalmykia, such as shops and cafes among others. Another important motivation for outmigration from Kalmykia is education. In the republic, attaining higher education has always had outsize importance, perhaps a product of the loss of social status associated with the World War II-era deportation of the Kalmyk nation. Education was one of the few ways to enhance social status in the Soviet period, and this practice has continued over the past three decades, with Moscow as one of the favored destinations. Kalmyks of university age move to Moscow to study, while their parents leave the republic to earn money for university fees. Other factors that facilitate movement to Moscow include geographic proximity (it takes two hours by airplane or 20 hours by bus to get from Elista, Kalmykia's capital, to Moscow), the affordability of travel, higher wages, more employment opportunities, and Kalmyks' fluency in Russian.
In Kalmykia, only a handful of academic articles have been published on the issue of outmigration. Using a household sampling methodology, Eldyaeva and Kovanova (2015) show that 70.4% of their respondents left Kalmykia for economic reasons, 71.6% of whom have higher education. A substantial percentage of migrants (37.9%) return to Kalmykia because of problems related to housing, daily life, or legal issues in host communities. The authors point out that difficulties connected with obtaining registration limit Kalmyk migrants’ rights and thus push them to secure fake registrations from shadowy firms. In their view, the high level of outmigration causes the following problems in Kalmykia: decline in birth rates, fewer working-age people, and shortages of seasonal agricultural workers, doctors, and nurses. Other Kalmyk scholars have used qualitative methods such as interviews and participant observation in their study of outmigration (Badmaeva 2021). Baranova’s (2016) anthropological study of Kalmyk migrants from rural areas who work in Moscow shows that when searching for a job and rental accommodation, Kalmyks rely on personal and ethnic networks, similar to strategies used by migrants from Central Asia. In their in-depth study of internal migration based on interviews with migrants, regional and municipal level officials, recruiters, and employers, Zayonchkovskaya and Mkrtchyan (2007) show that internal migrants’ experiences with registration, job searches, healthcare, and interaction with the police are often similar to those of foreign migrants and that the laws regulating internal migration are ambiguous and contradictory, which creates multiple opportunities for corruption and sustains the informal employment sector. Whatever the reasons for traveling to Moscow, some Kalmyks make the Russian capital their permanent home, while others shuttle between the republic and Moscow with varying frequency.

2 Methodology

The paper draws on 53 in-depth interviews conducted by the lead author in Moscow and Kalmykia in January and February 2020, just prior to the outbreak of the coronavirus pandemic. Interlocutors were ethnic Kalmyks of various ages and social backgrounds. About two-thirds of our sample were female (n = 36). Participants were recruited through snowball sampling, with the aim of achieving a balanced sample with respect to age, occupation, and length of stay in the Russian capital across all informants. In execution, the sample skewed towards young and middle-aged individuals (out of 53 total respondents, 35 were between the ages of 25 and 44 years old), due primarily...
to educational and employment dynamics. On average, interviews lasted one hour; the longest was three hours and the shortest was 30 minutes.

Most interlocutors had considerable experience living in Russia’s capital. Thirty-six respondents had lived in Moscow between six and 15 years and 20 respondents reported owning an apartment. All respondents were legally employed, although several of the oldest respondents, who were pensioners, were either unemployed or self-employed as caregivers or nannies. We also interviewed post-graduate students who worked part-time. The list of occupations included civil servants, bankers, small and mid-size firm workers, lawyers, IT specialists, small business owners and entrepreneurs, engineers, security guards, and drivers. The relevant interview topics included reasons and motivation for migration, the strategies interview subjects used to find accommodation and work, acquiring registration or propiska, socialization, life satisfaction, future plans, views on outmigration from Kalmykia, and experiences with racism or xenophobia in Moscow.

3 The Everyday Experiences of Kalmyk Migrants in Moscow

In Kalmyk accounts of living in Moscow, the idea of self-image has a prominent place. Self-image is important in understanding not only what Kalmyks think of themselves in migration, but also how they perceive others and are perceived by Muscovites. Aware of their Asian phenotype, the economic marginality of their home republic, and the lack of proper residence permits (Rus. registratsiia, propiska), Kalmyk migrants’ experiences of discrimination and power inequalities are similar to those of labor migrants from Central Asia and the Caucasus (Reeves 2015). Legally, Kalmyks are different from Central Asian migrants in terms of their Russian citizenship. Having a Russian passport, however, does not necessarily accord all citizenship rights by default (see Agadjanian et al 2017 for experiences of naturalized Central Asian migrants), and many Kalmyks believe that citizenship has to be enacted or performed (see Reeves 2013, 2015 on enactment, embodiment, and authentication in the case of Kyrgyz in Russia). Through actions such as speaking impeccable Russian, conforming to accepted behavioral norms, and dressing formally, not to mention proudly displaying their Russian passports when legitimately requested, many Kalmyks try to enact their civic belonging to the Russian state and society daily. This enactment often has a strategic purpose: to avoid being stopped or detained by the police or harassed by the public; to increase job prospects; to facilitate finding an apartment to rent; and to enhance social standing in the
eyes of Russians, among others. In this way, Kalmyks consciously try to mark themselves, at least in public, as a group distinct from other migrant populations, in particular Central Asians, in the Russian capital.

### 3.1 Racism and Xenophobia as Experienced by Kalmyk Migrants

The experiences of Kalmyk migrants in Moscow are distinct from those of various nationalities from the Caucasus, Central Asian migrants from countries like Kyrgyzstan and Uzbekistan, or indeed from those of ethnic Russians from elsewhere in the country. While experiences with xenophobia and discrimination occur objectively, such experiences can also be subjectively interpreted because different people may react in different ways to the same situation depending on personality, social status, or beliefs. As evidenced by our interviews, Kalmyks’ racial characteristics influence the reception, including instances of racism and xenophobia, which they experience beyond the borders of their home region. Historically, xenophobia and racism in Russia is nothing new, and it existed in the Soviet period despite there being a considerable level of resistance to it in the context of the ideology of “the friendship of peoples” (Sahadeo 2019). Xenophobic attitudes became increasingly prominent and vitriolic in Russia during the 1990s and 2000s (Pain 2007, Harding 2009), before declining since about 2010. In Russia today xenophobic attitudes exhibited by ethnic Russians do not seem to have a direct correlation with political beliefs, education level, social background, or demographic factors; rather, such sentiments are found across age groups and political orientations in Russian society (Pilkington 2015). For example, according to Gorodzeisky, Glikman, and Maskileyson (2015), people with higher levels of education in Russia are more likely to have anti-immigrant attitudes.

As in other Russian cities, in Moscow migrants’ everyday encounters with various forms of ethnic intolerance are also shaped by complex hierarchies connected with one’s social, cultural, and regional background. While many non-Slavic individuals are stigmatized as lacking cultural capital, the average Muscovite might also view village Russians as lacking the proper cultural background and status (Sahadeo 2019). The less one is perceived to have cultural capital, the less respect that person is accorded; non-Slavic looking migrants with poor command of Russian and lacking signs of social status and sophistication are the most vulnerable, subject to more discrimination and

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6 See, for example, data on open acts of violence collected by the SOVA Center for Information and Analysis, a Moscow-based NGO, https://www.sova-center.ru/en/database/, which indicates a substantial decline in such acts between 2007 and 2021.
ethnic intolerance (Kuznetsova and Round 2018). Sasha, a 36-year-old Kalmyk accountant, says that Central Asian migrants are treated poorly at the construction firm where she works, referred to as raby (trans. "slaves") or uzkogla-zye (trans. "slit-eyed") by the ethnic Russian workers. By contrast, Sasha herself is treated well by her Russian colleagues thanks to her impeccable Russian and knowledge of Russian culture. However, in public places she is often subjected to harassment based on her Asian looks: “I see everywhere that they (Slavs) do not treat us well. If they don’t know you personally, they think that you are stupid or something ... In the subway you feel those looks, they just stare at you.” She adds that at her first job in Moscow her boss was fond of everything ‘Asian’ and showed her off to his partners as his Asian employee, which made Sasha feel like an ‘exhibit.’

Other interlocutors echoed their contrasting experiences with racism at the workplace and in public. Irina (36 years old [y/o]) and Natalia (30 y/o) are both white collar workers, employed as a manager and IT specialist, respectively. According to Irina, “We (Kalmyks) are all citizens of Russia. If you look properly (i.e., are well-dressed), the police do not approach you.” Irina tries to disregard the racial epithets hurled at her by strangers, partly because she “knows” that had they known she was Kalmyk – and hence a Russian citizen – they would behave differently towards her. To support her position, Irina related the following story: “I have a colleague, a (Russian) woman, 40, from Voronezh. She is a tough nationalist, but she always says to me, ‘I regard you, Kalmyks, as my people.’ She does not like Kyrgyz and Uzbeks because they do not speak Russian [well in her opinion].” Similarly, Natalia does not have any trouble with racism at work, which cannot be said about her experiences on the street. Outspoken and socially active, she publicly opposes all manifestations of racism by Russians – policemen in particular – towards Asian-looking people. When stopped by a policeman at a metro station, she disputes with them the legality of their actions; she also stops to question policemen seen interrogating other non-Slavic-looking persons. Natalia’s behavior is shaped by her belief in the individual rights of all citizens and that demanding the police follow the Russian Constitution deters them from conducting unlawful checks. As a woman “who knows her rights,” Natalia suggests that her tactics are usually successful.

The importance of looking “confident,” “being bold while interacting with the police,” and “walking like a Muscovite” as a technique of deflecting police attention and hence hostility were recurring themes in our interviews. Looking confident was seen by many of our interlocutors as a performative act aimed at signaling to the police the performer’s status as a Russian citizen. Nadia, 50,
a security guard: “The police see when we, Russia’s Asians, are self-confident, because we have a Russian passport. They also know that Asians from the near abroad are rarely self-confident. The police are police, they have trained eyes.” Hence many Kalmyks who were more often stopped by the police in the past but today are stopped less frequently or are not stopped at all often attribute this change in their fortune to their looks, as seen from an interview with Adyan, 28, a programmer: “I was periodically stopped (by the police) in the past, when I was a student. Today it is rare. Maybe in the past it was obvious that I was a newcomer. Maybe I didn’t walk like Muscovites.” 

Although Kalmyk migrants to the capital have developed strategies to reduce their interactions with police, discrimination on ethnic grounds can have myriad subtle forms. Mergen, 28, a driver, reports: “I am happy with my salary (in Moscow), but not happy with anything else – traffic jams, crowds, and the way [Russians] look at me. There is no such thing at work (e.g., hostile glances), but on the street, it is pervasive.” Baira, who is 36 years old and employed as a manager: “When I was pregnant, once I was going home from university together with my (Russian) friend. I had a big bump, everybody on the bus saw it, but nobody offered me a seat […] I remember (my friend) Tanya went up to a guy and said, ‘Don’t you see, there is a pregnant woman here. Give her your seat.’ An old Russian woman who was sitting next to him said, ‘Why are you standing up? Just keep sitting. Russians do not have enough space (in their own country) anyway.’” Anastasia (36 y/o) is an office worker and relates a similar experience: “Once I sat next to a man on the suburban train, it was a long journey. I remember the man started to shift something from his pocket to another pocket, looking at me with apprehension, as if I was going to steal from him. I just wanted to say to him, ‘Come on, you are dressed worse and cheaper than me (who is going to steal from whom?).’” Kira (23 y/o), a master’s degree student, encountered discrimination in higher education: “(For my undergraduate degree) I went to a university close to home (on the outskirts of Moscow) where all students were Russian […] Lecturers didn’t treat non-Russian students very well there, always downgrading my marks […] The next summer I sent my application to all proper universities (in central Moscow). When I started to study at my new university, the Plekhanov Russian University of Economics, I received the best marks […] I didn’t have problems with the lecturers whatsoever.” For Bulgun (27 y/o), a financial analyst, the context of her interactions matters: “Sometimes it seems to me that in shops if the previous customer is Russian, the cashier is polite and says ‘Hello! Here’s a bag for you’ with a smile on her face. But when you come up, she scans in silence with a completely different demeanor, tossing your purchase carelessly.”
3.2 **Nuance in Migrant Experiences: Gender and Interethnicity**

The success of certain tactics can, however, be gender dependent. Ochir, 27 and a lawyer, was walking on the street talking on the phone when he was approached by a policeman who demanded to see his passport. Ochir did not initially comply and asked the policeman to wait until he finished his phone call. When he produced his Russian passport, the policeman confiscated it on the grounds that Ochir lacked a proper Moscow registration. This led to a verbal confrontation between the two, attracting a nearby group of police. Ochir was then handcuffed and forced into a police car and taken to the station. During our interview, Ochir showed a scar on his hand from the handcuffs and said he was singled out and stopped by the policeman because of his Asian appearance, being mistaken for a migrant worker from Central Asia.

Boris, who earned a PhD in economics in Japan, offered a comparison between that country and Russia. After finishing his doctorate, Boris returned to Kalmykia in 2007 but soon moved to Moscow because he “could not find any job in Kalmykia.” In Moscow, with his prestigious foreign degree, he soon found a job at a Russian bank. The atmosphere at the bank was “awful” and “aggressive,” with “shouting, a lack of discipline, [and] swearing among the personnel.” “Shocked” and unwilling to put up with this type of stress at work, Boris successfully applied to a western bank for a lesser position. On the street, Boris was frequently subject to harassment; he was called names and regularly stopped by the police at metro stations. The gendered dynamics to which Boris was exposed – aggression in the workplace and taunting in the streets – are arguably distinct from the experience of female migrants, who felt similar stresses but experienced them in different ways.

Kalmyks of mixed-ethnic background (i.e., one of whose parents is Russian and the other Kalmyk) are another group whose interactions with Muscovites vary depending on their looks. Some such people look more Russian than Kalmyk. Maria’s story is representative. With dark hair but Russian features, Maria, 29, has a Russian mother and Kalmyk father. She works in central Moscow but lives on the outskirts with her husband, a Kalmyk with darker skin and Mongoloid features, and their child. Maria herself was never subjected to racism but says her husband has been: “My husband feels it (i.e., racism) very strongly because everybody looks at him as if he is a guest worker (from

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7 Although data on intermarriage was kept during the Soviet period, neither the Russian Federation nor the Republic of Kalmykia has continued this practice; in turn, we do not know how many Kalmyks are of mixed parentage and how they choose to identify within ethnic categories.
Central Asia) [...] He is often stopped (by the police) at the metro station [...] He is offended by it [...] When the three of us go on a walk to the park, people usually do not look at us. But when he goes with our son for a walk, old women sitting in the park go like ‘Oh, (these people) have flooded (into Moscow).’" Lena, 42, a beautician, is similar to Maria: she also has a Slavic appearance and has a Kalmyk-looking husband and a son who is “a copy of my husband with narrow eyes.” Although Lena was never subjected to racial discrimination herself, she was rebuked by a passenger on public transport for “giving birth to a child the father of whom is who knows what.”

3.3 An Improved Racial Climate in Russia’s Capital?

Boris, the banker with a PhD in economics from Japan, suggested that acknowledging his prior experiences, the situation with respect to racism and xenophobia in the Russian capital has improved and there is “less tension” in the air. He attributes this to broad-based improvement in the standard of living in Moscow in recent years. Whenever Boris gets stopped by police, which occurs rarely these days, he shows his Russian passport with a Moscow propiska and communicates in impeccable Russian, which makes “the police relax immediately.” Having developed a “confident Moscow-style face” and now “looking the police straight in the eyes,” Boris believes that his behavior deters law enforcement officers from stopping him.

Today, open racism in Moscow, according to the perception and personal experience of another interlocutor, Tseren, has diminished compared to the late 2000s. He attributes this partly to his own willingness to stand up for himself or his Kalmyk friends and to say what he needs to, whereas in the past he was a “shy and timid” boy. Tseren, 30 and working as a security guard (Rus. okhrannik) at the time of our interview, is aware that “whenever you start speaking [in Russian] correctly, they (i.e., ethnic Russians) would immediately understand that you are a citizen of Russia,” which he tries to use to his advantage.

While many Kalmyks acknowledge the existence of xenophobia in Moscow, some of the interviewees downplayed it, instead tending to explain this phenomenon as a matter of individual perspective and interpretation. Kalmyks who privileged this perspective tended to be young or middle aged, with degrees from top universities in the capital (e.g., the Higher School of Economics [HSE] or Moscow State University [MGU]). Altan, 25, holds an economics degree from HSE and never had problem with racism in Moscow: “When someone believes that there is some kind of racism, then he is faced with it. If he does not believe, he just does not believe in it. This is my position, so I usually do not notice it (i.e., racism).” Grigoriy, 35, is a successful entrepreneur with a...
degree from MGU and lives in an expensive neighborhood in central Moscow. He is critical of his fellow Kalmyks, many of whom have “an inferiority complex of a small people.” When asked if he has experienced instances of racism in Moscow, he paused: “I cannot recall right now. Probably, I never came across [it]. I'm an open person, and I don't dwell on such things too much [...] When you start working (in a good job), no one cares what your eye shape or skin color is.” Delya, 38, an engineer, has similar views: “Kalmyks who come to Moscow in search of a job make a big mistake thinking that because they have narrow eyes, they would face discrimination. In reality, no one cares about one's ethnicity.”

A high-ranking bureaucrat in Moscow, Larissa, 48, arrived in the capital in 2010 and through her well-connected friends secured a managerial position in a factory. Well-paid and socially active, she bought a nice apartment, has frequently traveled internationally, and feels “comfortable” in her workplace. While acknowledging that “there were some moments in shops or state offices when somebody said something” about her ethnicity, Larissa stands up for herself as “a Russian passport holder and an active citizen of Moscow.” When people see her passport in a special cover with the inscription ‘active citizen’ (aktivniy grazhdanin is a cover provided by the city of Moscow to citizens who engage in online voting and hence are seen as politically active), she asserts that “people begin to treat me differently.” Larissa contends that in Moscow she personally “never felt discrimination” based on her ethnicity, which contrasted with her husband’s experience – he decided to return to Kalmykia after being subjected to verbal abuses he thought to have been “ethnically instigated.”

According to successful Kalmyks who we interviewed, hostility towards non-Slavic looking people in Moscow is mainly displayed by Russians of lower social status, including babushki (old women who are pensioners), low-paid Russian migrants from the regions, and, as Larissa contends, “those who are not happy with their lives.” These beliefs are generally reinforced by the social arrangements and conditions they live in. Such individuals are less frequently exposed to xenophobic prejudices on the streets due to their lifestyle: they travel in private cars (i.e., do not use public transportation), shop in brand-name stores, live in prestigious neighborhoods, dress well (hence, are less likely to be stopped by the police or harassed by strangers), and are in positions of relative power in the workplace.

This is not to say that high-status Kalmyks never have racist interactions. Aleksei, 38, an entrepreneur, who does not believe racism exists in Russian society, came across “inadequate” Russians several times. On one occasion Aleksei was called names by an “adequately-dressed elderly Russian man” in a lift who was unhappy about “Asian guest workers flooding into Moscow.” When
Aleksei explained that he “can live wherever I wish in my motherland” and that he is a Kalmyk, the old man apologized for mistaking him for a “black” from Central Asia. Approvingly nodding his head and smiling, the man even added: “Yes, you [Kalmyks] are ours (da, vy nashi).” Aisa, 35, a lawyer, is another economically successful Kalmyk who contends that she was never offended in Moscow on ethnic grounds but admits that she is “always ready to be verbally abused outside her office. It is just everyday nationalism.”

The status-induced bias articulated by well-off Kalmyks in our interviews also influences their views regarding their compatriots; according to them, the majority of Kalmyks in Moscow are of the same social status as they are themselves. This is in stark contrast with “ordinary” Kalmyks, who contend that the majority of Kalmyks in Moscow are of “working-class” background (laborers, waitresses, kitchen porters, nurses, drivers, shop assistants, cashiers, guards, caregivers, etc.), which suggests that Kalmyks of different social backgrounds do not frequently interact with each other. Although there are no reliable statistics, in our estimation most Kalmyks in the Russian capital are engaged in blue-color or menial jobs. This is particularly true among middle-aged and older Kalmyks, often from rural Kalmykia, who did not have the opportunity to make a career or study in Moscow. Many interviewees noted that in recent years the number of retired Kalmyks has increased significantly: some of them came to help their children with childcare but more often they come to work to help their children pay off bank loans or mortgages. Adyan, 28, says, “I see many old people at various Kalmyk events, for example, at religious events, and I am surprised that there are so many of them around. Perhaps the number of Kalmyks in Moscow is substantial – I cannot give an exact estimation.”

3.4 The Economics of Migration for Kalmyk Migrants: Initial and Ongoing Challenges

We do not choose [a flat], we get chosen [by landlords]

VERA, 67

One area where Kalmyks still experience challenges due to their ethnicity is in the housing market. According to Mukomel (2013, 209), discrimination in Moscow’s housing market is primarily determined by one’s ethnicity rather than citizenship; for example, landlords often specifically advertise their property for rent with requirements that it is for “Slavs only” or for “a Russian family only.” This deters non-Slavic looking migrants from directly contacting landlords, compelling them to seek help from members of their same ethnic group.
According to Reeves (2016), Kyrgyz migrants find accommodation in Moscow through Kyrgyz channels, including friends, relatives, classmates, and migrants from the same village or region. They frequently live in cramped conditions – a two-bedroom apartment could house up to 30 people. Living in such close quarters is attributable to the low salaries that Kyrgyz migrants – who mainly work in menial jobs – earn as well as the high rents in Moscow; moreover, many Kyrgyz try to save money to maximize their remittances for their households back home (see Gerber and Zavisca 2020). These “communal” apartments are managed by a Kyrgyz family that rents it in their name and then sublets sleeping spaces (Russ. *koiko-mesto*) to their compatriots (Reeves 2016). The apartment itself is often not rented directly from the landlord but through a Russian intermediary who, for a fee paid by the tenant family, guarantees the landlord that the Kyrgyz tenants will pay their rent on time and will not sublet the rooms. In such situations, landlords often ask for higher rent than if the tenants were Russian.

Many Kalmyk migrants use similar techniques when first arriving in Moscow. They appeal to ethnic channels, again including family members, friends, and migrants from the same village. In the past few years, the emergence of online advertisements and specialized websites have offered a wider scope for search, with the most popular websites being a Kalmyk group on vKontakte (“Advertisements for Moscow Kalmyks”) and, to a lesser degree, the Russian websites www.cian.ru and www.avito.ru. In comparison to Kyrgyz migrants, Kalmyks do not live in such cramped conditions – a two-bedroom apartment would typically house six people at most – because Kalmyks usually work in better-paying jobs and do not have the same pressure to send regular remittances home, instead prioritizing their education and careers. For instance, Sasha, the 36-year-old accountant introduced above, previously lived in a cramped apartment: “In the past it was rough [...] [Ten years ago] I lived as follows – in one room there were four people and in the other room another four, that is eight people in the apartment altogether.”

Sometimes, Kalmyks live with Kyrgyz and other migrant groups. Katya, an accountant, shared an apartment with Kyrgyz migrants when she first arrived in Moscow in 2007, but later moved out to live with Kalmyks; since 2019, she and her husband have rented a room on the outskirts of the city. Katya has lived in Moscow for a total of eight years. She first came to the Russian capital in 2007, feeling “sick and tired of living without money [in Kalmykia].” She stayed for five years, working first as a waitress at a Chinese restaurant and then as a croupier at a casino. In 2012, she returned to Kalmykia, bought a one-bedroom apartment with the money she had earned in Moscow, and took a course in accountancy to improve her employment prospects. Katya
returned to Moscow in 2017, and today works in the city as an accountant. This shuttle migration between Moscow and Kalmykia has allowed Katya to further enhance her economic prospects.

Katya says that she is often mistaken by Kyrgyz as Kyrgyz. In the past, she was also profiled by the police, who mistook her for a Central Asian migrant and stopped her to check her documents, especially at Vykhino metro station, where there is a large open market employing many Central Asian laborers. Today, by contrast, the police stop her very rarely – since 2017, she was stopped only once at Paveletskaya metro station – and do not ask much when they see her Russian passport and hear her excellent Russian speech.

Another technique that Kalmyks employ is to co-rent with Russian friends from Kalmykia or Slavic-looking mixed-race Kalmyks who act as the main tenant. The story of Nogana, 24 and an economist, is illustrative: “For the flat that we have rented, they wanted ‘Slavs only.’ We talked on the phone (with the landlady). My boyfriend’s name is Andrei, and there was no problem (with renting the apartment). He’s mixed-race. We arrived (at the flat), told the landlady about ourselves. She liked us.”

These workarounds help Kalmyks secure housing, but some still face prejudice in attempting to rent an apartment, as there are Muscovite landlords who would not let their property to non-Slavs whatever their citizenship or familiarity with Russian language and culture. Nyudlya, 25 and a lawyer, relayed her experience: “We looked for a flat on www.cian.ru. There was an issue that flats were ‘for Slavs only’ [...] There were many adverts like that. [When on the phone with the landlords] we explained that we are citizens of the Russian Federation, that we are employed. But they refused us anyway [...] We searched for a week, made calls, but did not visit a single apartment. There is a Kalmyk group on vKontakte; there was an offer to rent a room by a Kalmyk woman. In the end, we rented my brother’s flat.”

While Kalmyks find ‘for Slavs only’ advertisements demeaning, those who have established themselves in Moscow try to directly negotiate with landlords (unlike, say, Kyrgyz who opt for a Russian intermediary) in the hope that their Russian citizenship will help them secure a residence. Jirgal, 34, a banker, suggested that ‘for Slavs only’ in fact meant ‘for Russian citizens only’: “Once I called a landlord and explained to him that I am from Kalmykia originally, that I work at a bank, have an official salary, have a family, and that I am not an ethnic Russian but Kalmyk. The reply was that it was not a problem at all, and he liked that I was a family man.” Sasha, the accountant mentioned above, once rented an apartment herself and was received with suspicion by the landlord: “I said to him, ‘I know, I’m Asian. You all want Slavs. But we will look after the flat, and we are not dirty. You can come and check your apartment anytime.’
When I showed him my diploma and passport, he softened somewhat. We sat together and talked a good deal. He was ok. Then he said to me, ‘Sasha, my first thought was just to turn around and leave. I didn’t want to rent to Asians because I didn’t want any problem.’” Elsa, 37 and an office worker, had a similar experience: “It was very hard to find a place to live because of prejudice against Asians [...] [Once, when I was negotiating with the landlord] I remember how I tried hard to persuade him that I am a decent person, that I work in an office [...] These searches were gloomy. Eventually, at the end of 2019 I bought a flat, and these stories with flats ended for me.” Vera, 67 and quoted at the beginning of this section, lives with her daughter and telephoned landlords directly. She contends: “Landlords still prefer Slavs. I told them we are from Russia, only our looks are different.” To prove that they would be reliable tenants, Vera’s daughter’s strategy is to dress up when meeting a potential landlord.

Kalmyks who have permanent employment and who plan to stay in Moscow long term invariably aim to buy an apartment, usually with the help of a mortgage. Out of 53 interlocutors, 20 reported owning an apartment, usually on the outskirts where property is more affordable than in central Moscow. The fact that Kalmyks can afford to buy an apartment helps them escape this pervasive and psychologically stressful form of discrimination that is still widespread in Moscow.

4 Discussion

Kalmyk migration to Moscow has mainly been driven by people of working age or students aiming to receive higher education in Moscow’s universities. Across all social backgrounds, our informants observed that the number of older Kalmyks in Moscow has increased significantly in recent years, which suggests that outmigration from Kalmykia is on the rise and now includes older cohorts who arrive in Moscow to join their children and grandchildren. Several older informants whom we interviewed told us that they were intending to work as hard and as long as they could to contribute to their family’s finances, though employment opportunities are significantly reduced for older workers but still better than in Kalmykia. Such Kalmyks do work as caregivers, nannies, or teachers. By contrast, Kalmyks of working age are engaged in the variety of occupations noted previously, which pay better and are more permanent.

Our interviews show that a growing number of Kalmyks have become permanent residents in Moscow by means of owning a flat and that they gradually reduce their travel to Kalmykia. Often close family members join them in Moscow, which then leads to their cutting ties with Kalmykia. Raising a family...
in Moscow requires parents to protect their children from possible discrimination. One informant, a mother of three, reported that her son was bullied at school because of his non-Slavic looks. The school was located in a prestigious neighborhood where almost all pupils were Slavs. After both parents made complaints to the school administration the discrimination stopped. Despite this, the mother decided to send her younger daughter to another school where many pupils are from Central Asia. Another informant said that he would rather send his child to Elista for schooling to protect him from exposure to possible racial discrimination from an early age.

While our informants evaluate migration, despite certain difficulties, as having been overall positive for themselves as individuals, they see this process as being negative for Kalmykia as a republic because of depopulation. Some even expressed their fear that this might lead to Kalmykia losing its status as a republic and becoming part of a neighboring region. However, this fear is not new having been articulated since the early 2000s. Most of our informants do not see themselves returning to Kalmykia in the foreseeable future and say that they will continue to live and work in Moscow. Some younger informants have expressed their wish to emigrate abroad. Older informants say they hope to return to Kalmykia when they are no longer able to work.

Our interviews suggest that xenophobia in Moscow is nuanced and experienced differently by individual informants. Ethnic Russians have been reported by our interviewees to discriminate based more on one’s cultural and linguistic distinctiveness than on one’s ethnic background. Kalmyks in Moscow – particularly women and those in higher-status positions – almost never experience discrimination at the workplace due to their Russian citizenship and exposure to Russian culture and language that their Russian colleagues come to appreciate. That said, Kalmyks have to prove their cultural capital each time they start on a new job. “Every time at a new job you have to prove that you are not a camel [i.e., a stupid person],” says Konstantin, a banker. “On my first day at a new job a girl was showing me how to turn on a PC,” adds Larissa, who was a high-ranking bureaucrat in Kalmykia.

In public spaces – on public transport, in shops, hospitals, on the street – at the level of daily life (na bytovom urovne), however, Kalmyks tend to be subjected to discrimination from strangers. That said, open hostility towards non-Slavic looking people in Moscow has diminished in recent years, taking more subtle forms (e.g., hostile looks, coldness in interaction). Occasional incidents of open hostility towards Kalmyks and other Asian looking Russian citizens continue to be reported. Some such incidents get phone recorded and spread via social media, sparking online discussions.
In sum, the experiences of our Kalmyk informants, as Russian citizens (rossiyane) of non-Slavic phenotype (ne russkie), offer a unique perspective, and add complexity to the conversation around experiences with racism and xenophobia in Russia’s capital. The nuance of these experiences is particularly important for understanding the phenomenon of internal migration in Russia, itself an understudied topic, and how those who move within the Russian state negotiate these experiences. In concluding, we reiterate that this paper draws on interviews conducted in January and February 2020, prior to the outbreak of the coronavirus pandemic and Western sanctions imposed on Russia since February 2022, when Russia’s economy was in a relatively good shape. Due to Russia’s isolation by the Western-led international community resulting in growing anxiety among the population and falling living standards in the country, domestic dynamics and levels of racism are anticipated to have changed, as well. While our monitoring of the Kalmyk outmigration situation via online resources (e.g., newspapers, chats, websites) suggests that the pandemic did not affect the stream of Kalmyk migration to Moscow, the “partial military mobilization” carried out across Russia beginning in September 2022 has disrupted this pattern. Many male Kalmyks eligible for mobilization (theoretically up to the age of 60, but in practice younger), living in Moscow or elsewhere, fled Russia, often accompanied by their family members. Acknowledging these recent developments, the findings of this paper pertain to the period under discussion, and the topics of internal migration in Russia and experiences of xenophobia and racism in the context of inter-ethnic relations in the country both need further research in the future.

References


