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## “Wandering Workers” as a New Force: Russia’s Case

The Russian migrant workers – *otkhodniks* – are a specific group of internal temporary labor migrants who migrate from small towns and rural areas to major cities and industrial centers, mainly in Moscow. Among them, seasonal and agricultural workers are a negligible minority. In my view, these Russian labor migrants differ from both circular (circulatory) cross-border migrants and seasonal agricultural migrants, well familiar in many countries of the world. To highlight these differences, we refer to them as «wandering workers», and this specific activity as «*otkhodnichestvo*». A self-designation for such wandering workers appeared in Russia about three or four centuries ago. People started calling them *otkhodniki* [from the Russian «*otkhod*» – temporary departure], and this is the term they themselves and the Russian scientists still use.

*Otkhodniks* movements, as a special type of labor migration is currently specific by far not only to Russia. It definitely exists in many post-Soviet republics, as in the past. Some of them, like Turkmenistan or Lithuania, are less affected (especially into Russia), whereas in some of the others, like Moldova, Ukraine, Belarus, Kyrgyzstan, Uzbekistan, and Tajikistan, *otkhodnichestvo* in the form of cross-border migration is as widespread as in Russia today, and even wider. Besides, quite a few other countries demonstrate examples of seasonal interregional circular migration of “labor resources”. Although here it is mostly an issue of cross-border migration of seasonal agricultural workers. *Otkhodnichestvo*, however, initially meant internal labor migration, rather than the cross-border one. Nowadays, the development of transportation and communication, and the easing or lifting of visa requirements facilitate *otkhodnichestvo*.

*Otkhodnichestvo* originates from the province. The overwhelming majority of contemporary labor migrants, who call themselves, and whom we call *otkhodniks*, reside in small towns and villages. Many small Russian towns are actually rural settlements

with respective household and economic arrangements.<sup>1</sup> Therefore, the families of most of these people are engaged in subsidiary farming; many of them live in private houses with adjacent garden plots. Generally, the income such people receive in their hometowns or villages is insufficient to provide a decent (sometimes even normal) life for the family. They have no highly paid jobs in the public sector, nor do they have sources of income in the private sector, be it manufacturing or services. Frequently, they have even no chance of finding a local job that would be in line with their vocation. Quite a few families live in economically doomed settlements, the so-called "escheated" townships and villages, where there are no jobs whatsoever, on the one hand, and no one to offer self-produced goods to, on the other hand.

The families of contemporary *otkhodniks*, just as they themselves, do not intend to leave their villages and small towns. The reasons for refusing to move differ, but they are everywhere supported by the psychological reluctance to change the environment and to lose the status and opportunities – the privileges of being an "insider" and the preferences granted to the "locals" – that any local community provides to its members. The lack of desire to change residence for the sake of a job is the most important pre-condition for a person to become an *otkhodnik*. That distinguishes him from a guest worker, who has changed his residence for the sake of potential better opportunities for work and life.

For the contemporary *otkhodnik*, independence is also a critical factor in the search for work; the initiative comes from the person himself. He either markets products of his labor (acting as a self-employed worker-entrepreneur, quite similar to the handicraft industry of the past), or takes up various jobs, most of which do not require high skills.

The forced nature of contemporary *otkhodnichestvo* in the province is due to a lack or poor quality of jobs available in the local labor market. However, we constantly note that this forced nature is relative: the well-being of *otkhodnik* families, both contemporary and former, is significantly higher than that of their non-*otkhodnik* neighbors. This is related to the important circumstance that the *otkhodnik* is driven not only by need; he is driven by the desire to raise the living standard of his beloved ones and to ensure that the family is well provided for. This is a very important feature: nowadays, mostly the wish to improve the well-being of the family rather than need trigger labor migration. Nowadays, the majority of *otkhodniks* from small towns can theoretically find employment locally, since jobs are available everywhere. The situation is different for rural *otkhodniks*, whose numbers are growing, but even they can find work as close as the district center. However, few *otkhodniks* accept such terms, as they are used to wages that are three to four times higher; even the psychological strain of constantly traveling back and forth does not deter them. In their mass, the *otkhodniks* are motivated to maintain high living standards for the family, and no one wants to lower the bar.

The mobility of economically active population remains concealed and imperceptible for official economic statistics. *Otkhodniks* are not recorded by government statistics. Neither are they registered in municipal reports. Most *otkhodniks* find jobs through acquaintances rather than through official information channels or public employment agencies. The overwhelming majority of *otkhodniks* offers their services themselves or works unofficially. They pay no taxes. Therefore, for the economy and

for the state they are non-existent. Meanwhile, the results of their activities provide many economic, social, and political effects. The subject of this paper is a brief analysis of these effects.

### Methodology and materials

The specific nature of the *otkhodniks'* activity requires customized methodology. Wandering workers have two key features: they are "invisible" to the authorities and they "elude" registration both in places of their permanent residence and there, where they find work. Besides, they are very irregularly distributed across the territory (in neighboring towns the percentage of active population engaged in *otkhodnichestvo* may differ vastly). Due to the above, the research methodology was necessarily based on qualitative analysis; and the principal methods we used to collect field data were direct observations in the regions where *otkhodniks* reside, and interviews with them.

Research procedures primarily include first hand observations in small towns and interviews with *otkhodniks*, their family members and neighbors – local inhabitants who are aware of this type of activity. Our procedure of direct observation is described in detail.<sup>2</sup>

Interviews focusing on contemporary *otkhodnichestvo* were the second, more detailed source of information on *otkhodniks* and their activities. The interviews were structured along several basic lines of research; and they were taken on the respondent's territory in the form of an open conversation. However, the search for a potential respondent could be exhausting and often unsuccessful, as evidenced by the report fragment quoted above. Moreover, even if a suitable person was found, there was absolutely no guarantee that he or she would be prepared to give an interview. As the *otkhodniks* are often economically active in the "shadow" sector of the economy, many of them are reluctant to discuss these matters even with their neighbors, to say nothing of "suspicious" researchers. Sometimes, a person who was indicated to us as an *otkhodnik* did not admit this fact to us. In those cases no interview could be taken. Although the interviews were conducted in free form, we followed a routine technology.<sup>3</sup> We did not show the questionnaire to the respondent. An interview could last from several minutes (10-15) to one or two hours. On average, an interview lasted from 40 minutes to an hour. Total sum of interview is 1399, including 643 deep interviews (see especially: Plusnin *et al.*, 2015<sup>4</sup>). Our field research of *otkhodnichestvo* lasted six full years – from 2010 through 2015. During this period, we carried out 24 separate expeditions in 40 Russian regions, focused on studying contemporary *otkhodnichestvo*. We obtained materials from 77 small towns, settlements and villages, which have the status of district centers.

### Russian *otkhodnichestvo* in comparison with the global labor migration

Seasonal domestic circular migration, similar to the Russian one, is not a commonplace phenomenon, and in other countries, such domestic migrants are relatively few in number. Probably, only China "can boast" of a similarly mass rural-urban circular labor migration comparable in scale.<sup>5</sup> What is the reason? Why do we think

