

Ear to Asia podcast

Title: Vietnamese seeking their fortunes underground in Russia

Description: For Vietnamese seeking their fortunes abroad, it turns out Russia is a sought after destination. Entering on short stay visas and overstaying sometimes for decades, they typically find work in urban market complexes, and in some cases resort to illegal activities to make ends meet. So what draws the Vietnamese to Russia? What are their day-to-day lives like? And given their insecure immigration status, what are their prospects in the long term? International development expert Dr Lan Anh Hoang shares their stories and her insights. Presented by Ali Moore. An Asia Institute podcast. Produced and edited by profactual.com. Music by audionautix.com.

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Voiceover: The Ear to Asia podcast is made available on the Jakarta Post platform under agreement between The Jakarta Post and The University of Melbourne.

Ali Moore: Hello, I'm Ali Moore. This is Ear to Asia.

Lan Ahn Hoang: The opportunity for Vietnamese to make a massive amount of money in Russia is like, you know, once in a lifetime opportunity. So they cannot stop. You know some of them tell me it's like heroin addiction because they know that if they quit, if they leave Russia and go back to Vietnam, they will never have the same opportunity again.

Ali Moore: In this episode, Vietnamese migrants living on the edge in Russia.

Ear to Asia is the podcast from Asia Institute, the Asia research specialist at The University of Melbourne. Globally, patterns of labour migration are both well-established and ever changing. Workers move within and across borders with newly industrialised economies, creating new opportunities.

Well documented examples include unskilled labour from the Philippines, or India, or Indonesia, providing vital and recognised workforces for countries as far a field as the Gulf, or people from central Asia heading to countries like Russia to try to make money. But there's another well travelled path to Russia, and one that's being given little recognition. It's a path trodden by hundreds of thousands of people from Vietnam, an important cold war era ally of the former Soviet Union.

Most Vietnamese migrants enter Russia on short-stay visas and overstay them, and they typically find work trading in big urban markets. Some wind up in illegal activities to make ends meet. So why do Vietnamese choose to relocate to Russia at great cost and potential risk? How does the uncertainty and insecurity they face change their lives. And given their insecure immigration status, what are their prospects in the longterm?

Joining me remotely to shine a light into the shadows of these largely untold stories is international development expert, Dr. Lan Anh Hoang from The

School of Social and Political Sciences at The University of Melbourne. Dr. Hoang's book on the topic just published is *Vietnamese Migrants in Russia: Mobility in Times of Uncertainty*. It's from Amsterdam University press. Welcome to Ear to Asia, Lan.

Lan Ahn Hoang: Hello, Ali. Nice to be here. Thank you for your invitation.

Ali Moore: Well, as I said, the path of Vietnamese migrants to Russia might be well-trodden, but it's not well recognised. Tell us about the people you focus on in your book, where are they from and what drives them to leave Vietnam?

Lan Ahn Hoang: As you have noted, Ali, Vietnamese migration to Russia is a legacy of cold war politics. And only the people coming from families that supported the communist regime could have the opportunity to migrate to Russia for education and for contract labour. And therefore, the Vietnamese people in Russia nowadays tend to come from north Vietnam and north central Vietnam. And these are also the regions that have been plagued by very high rates of unemployment and underemployment since the launch of the economic reforms in 1980s.

Ali Moore: Are they largely people from rural areas?

Lan Ahn Hoang: Yes. They mostly come from poor rural backgrounds in north Vietnam and north central Vietnam.

Ali Moore: And why Russia today? Because yes, there are strong historical connections as you just talked about then, during the cold war, but today, what is it about Russia that provides those economic opportunities?

Lan Ahn Hoang: There's a tendency to characterise international migration in the contemporary world, as uni-directional flows from developing countries to developed countries. And what is less known is a growing rate of migration within developing countries. And Russia has one of the largest shadow economy in the world. What is often seen as barriers to economic growth in other contexts, such as widespread corruption and weak law enforcement are seen as major attractions for migrants from Vietnam.

Because of the uncertainty in Russia's shadow economy, there are also a lot of possibilities and opportunities for them. So, many transitional economies in Eastern Europe have become destinations of choice for low-skilled migrants from developing countries, because it is where opportunistic entrepreneurs and businessmen can make a fast buck.

Ali Moore: You focused your research on the so-called market traders. Are most Vietnamese migrants in Russia involved in market trade? Is that where they find themselves?

Lan Ahn Hoang: It is believed so. Because of the large proportion of undocumented migration from Vietnam to Russia, no one can provide an accurate figure on the number of Vietnamese people in Russia. But Russian scholars estimate

that up to 92% of Vietnamese nationals in Russia are engaged in market trade.

Ali Moore: And mainly in Moscow.

Lan Ahn Hoang: Mainly in the Moscow region. So there's Moscow City and Moscow region, and it is estimated that the Moscow region and Moscow City hosts about one third of all undocumented migrants to Russia.

Ali Moore: And is it Moscow, because that's where you find these large wholesale markets where the Vietnamese can do business?

Lan Ahn Hoang: There are smaller Vietnamese communities in provincial centres and smaller cities all over Russia, but they are of a very insignificant scale. The Moscow wholesale markets are the main hubs that provide consumer goods to retail traders from all over Russia.

Ali Moore: And in fact, it's the Sadovod market where you did most of your research. Can you describe that for us? What's it like?

Lan Ahn Hoang: It is a very large market. I did my field work in three main markets in Moscow. At the top of the hierarchy was Liublino. It is very exclusive space because rental at this market at Liublino is up to \$20,000 a month, \$25,000 a month. At the lower rung of the ladder is Yuzhynie Vorota, or Southern Gate market where rental is between \$500, and \$1000. Sadovod market is in the middle of that hierarchy where rentals vary widely and where you can find any consumer goods that there's a market demand for.

Ali Moore: And essentially, the Vietnamese traders, they're obviously selling consumer goods, but what do they sell specifically, and who do they sell to, and where do they get the product from?

Lan Ahn Hoang: So Vietnamese concentrate in clothing and footwear, but mostly clothing in garment wholesale activities. And the most important customers are retail traders who travel all the way from remote, rural villages and provincial towns to acquire their wears at Sadovod and resell them at their local markets. There are also local Muscovites who come and shop at the market and they are mostly from lower or middle income families.

Ali Moore: And where do the goods come from? Are they from China?

Lan Ahn Hoang: China is the primary source of the wears sold at Sadovod, but Turkey, Poland, have also become very important sources of the merchandise at Sadovod. There's also a small segment of clothing garment provided by local garment factories owned by Vietnamese people, and these include both legal and illegal garment factories.

Ali Moore: We said in the introduction that most traders enter Russia on short-stay visas and then overstay them. What's the official status of these traders? Are they recognised by the Russian authorities? Do they have any legal status at all?

Lan Ahn Hoang: Believe it or not, most of the people that I came into contact with, that I interviewed, had some sort of legal documents. So it could be a valid visa, valid work permit, or dependent visa, or a certificate provided by the Vietnamese embassy stating that the passport was being renewed by the Vietnamese embassy.

However, because of the very complex bureaucratic requirements of the Russia migration regime, they can still be seen as illegal migrants if they are subjected to spot check by police. For example, in Russia, you are required to register your residence. And if you do not live at the address that you have registered as your main residential address, you are considered illegal. And most Vietnamese people do not live at their registered residential address.

Ali Moore: So their life is precarious?

Lan Ahn Hoang: Yeah, very. In the book, I describe how uncertainty has become a dominant force regulating people's lives. And it is largely shaped by the way the blurred boundaries between legality and illegality in their migrant status. And by the sudden closure of the major markets where they used to work in the last 20, 30 years. So basically, people just take one day at a time, I would say. They take one day at a time because they can never be sure what is going to happen tomorrow. Markets can be closed with immediate effect. They may lose their every last dollar tomorrow. So this has a powerful impact on the way they lead their social, economic and intimate lives.

Ali Moore: And in fact, you talk about that level of uncertainty in their life. You write about the fact that it's not just social, or economic, or political, it's every aspect of life. It's also psychological and it's moral. In practice, what does that mean? Do the traders tend to stick together to support each other?

Lan Ahn Hoang: Yeah. So uncertainty can be both destructive and productive. On the one hand, people have to stick together because the only source of social security comes from the co-ethnic or micro-networks. On the other hand, because of uncertainty, there's a sense of judicious opportunities and everyone feels like they have to grab every opportunity that is present before it evaporates.

And that is played out in every aspect of their life, even in intimate life. So there's a serious erosion of trust because you can never be sure what your partner, either business partner or intimate partner, is planning to do with the money that you are earning or with the business. So people are very cautious when it comes to collaboration or relationship. But then on the other hand, this sense of uncertainty also makes them feel very vulnerable and therefore they reach out to other people and very proactively develop new relationships.

Ali Moore: Before we look at that erosion of trust in more detail, can you just tell us a little bit of a picture of daily life, which helps to explain why it's very hard to survive alone? Isn't it? It's not an easy life running a store at one of these markets.

Lan Ahn Hoang: The climate in Russia is very inhospitable. As you might be aware, in winter, the temperature may drop to -30, -35, but the day at the market is very long because most of these markets are wholesale markets, and their customers come from very far places. So traders have to arrive at the market to set up for the day at around five o'clock in the morning. And because of the exorbitant rental rate between \$10,000 dollar, and 15,000 US dollar a month at Sadovod, you have to work long hours in order to make ends meet in order to be able to pay that rental. They tend to work 12 hours a day and take only one day off a year, that is the new year day, not by choice, but because the market is closed that day.

Ali Moore: So even though you have this intense competition and this erosion of trust, for many traders, they have no choice, but to work together to an extent?

Lan Ahn Hoang: Yeah, precisely. They have to work together. And especially if you run a store at the market, you cannot run it by yourself because you need to travel outside the market to a larger market like Liublino, for example, to acquire new stock. And you need someone that you can trust who can man the store when you are away. So people often work in pairs or with their family members.

Ali Moore: I was going to ask, how important is family given this erosion of trust? Is it the family members who are most trusted?

Lan Ahn Hoang: People tend to bring their family members from Vietnam to help them run their business. And this is also deeply rooted in the Vietnamese culture, the smallholder farming culture, where trust tends to be restricted to very narrow networks of kin, kinsmen and neighbours in the same village.

So people are willing to invest the money in bringing their family members to Russia, but sometimes family members can become rivals at the marketplace as the sense of uncertainty also creates competitiveness and opportunities and that sometimes divide families.

Ali Moore: You have stories of a breakdown of trust within families. Can you give us some examples of how that plays out?

Lan Ahn Hoang: One of my respondents sent for her sister to Russia and with the expectation that the sister would be a trusted assistant, helping her and her husband run their store at the market. But as soon as the sister saved enough money, she opened a store just next to their store, selling the same merchandise from the same source.

So they are in direct competition and they do all sorts of things in order to snatch customers from each other. For example, if they see that a customer has bought a pair of jeans from the sister's store, they would stop the person when they exited the sister's store and offer them a lower price. And so it would lead to violent fights sometimes at the market.

And in another example, one of the male respondents in my story was living with his long-term partner and their two-year-old daughter. And then his

mother in Vietnam fell ill, he had to travel home to visit his mother. And when he returned to Russia, he found out that his partner and his daughter had disappeared with all the savings they had. Things like that happen on a daily basis. It's very common in all the narratives narrated to me by my respondents.

Ali Moore: So if you can't trust people, what do they trust?

Lan Ahn Hoang: There's a sense that when you cannot trust anyone, the only thing you can trust is money, because money is seen as fixed. The value of the money is fixed. \$1 stays \$1, no matter how different the situation around them is. But your trusted business partner today may become a rival tomorrow. And so, money has emerged as a linchpin in the social networks of Vietnamese in Moscow, because people believe that it is the only currency of care, the only thing that can be exchanged for trust and for loyalty.

Ali Moore: You also found another outcome of that lack of trust. And that was that secrecy is the absolute key to success. Why is that? What are the risks, for example, of talking to fellow store holders?

Lan Ahn Hoang: So success at the marketplace anywhere in the world is a zero sum game. The more competitors, the more rivals you have. The more stores selling the same merchandise, the less likely you succeed. So if you sell something really well and you make quite a lot of money from a certain item, then you have to remain tight-lipped. You don't tell anyone, even your brothers and your sisters, or your closest friends, because if they copy that, they start selling the same thing, then your income would be immediately affected. Or if people believe that the spot that you are having, the store that you are renting can generate more income than other spots at the market, they may come to the store owner and offer a higher rental rate and take that store from you. So secrecy is a key to business success at the market.

Ali Moore: You talked earlier about how markets can be closed at a moment's notice. And if we have a look back in history, the markets that you studied, essentially were replacements for earlier markets that had been closed or destroyed by authorities. Tell us about one of those earlier markets that was shut down by the authorities, is that the Cho Vom market was shut down a number of years ago in 2008, but it does seem that the story of that market underlines the precarious life of the trader.

Lan Ahn Hoang: Cho Vom, which is known to Muscovites as Cherkizovsky market was in the North of Moscow. I think it was established in the mid 1990s when profit making became legal in Russia. And it thrived in the 2000s, thanks to the economic boom in Russia's energy-driven economy. And then the market owner, Telman Ismailov, a Jewish businessman, fell out of favour with the Moscow government and federal government because he invested all the wealth he made in Russia in Turkey.

And also, there were reports of the trade of contraband items and illegal imports and sanitation and fire hazard from Cherkizovsky, and so it was

closed down without any prior notice in 2008. It was employing about 100,000 migrants. So it was devastating for the people in my study.

Ali Moore: And they lost everything?

Lan Ahn Hoang: Most of them, and many of them decided to return to Vietnam because they felt like they could not put up with the ups and downs of Russian marketplaces any longer. But many couldn't find any longterm viable income generating opportunities in Vietnam because they had lost touch or they didn't have the necessary networks in Vietnam to set up a new business, and they had to return to Russia.

Ali Moore: You're listening to Ear to Asia from Asia Institute at The University of Melbourne. I'm Ali Moore, and I'm joined by international development researcher, Dr. Lan Ahn Hoang, from the School of Social and Political Sciences at The University of Melbourne. We're talking about the plight of informal Vietnamese migrants in Russia.

When it came to writing this book and researching the lives of the traders, given what you've said about the key to success being to remain tight-lipped, even with your language skills, how hard was it to hear the real truth of the stories of these traders?

Lan Ahn Hoang: It was very hard. So the original design of my study was to conduct in-depth interviews with about 50 Vietnamese migrant traders. And I did that in 2013, but after a month in Russia, it was the teaching break between June and July. After I had conducted 30 interviews, I realised that I could not get into the depth of people's lives in Russia without spending more time and immersing myself in the community because the market work regime is very onerous, very exploitative. People work long hours, there's intense competition at the market.

And as you said, secrecy is the key to business success. No one told me the truth. So they were very polite. They agreed to let me interview, but then the answers that I get from these interviews were very superficial. So I had to return to Russia in 2014 and then in 2016 again, to do ethnographic research.

Ethnographic research is mainly participant observations, spending long hours at the market, adopting their daily routines, and then just observing and extracting information from daily conversations and observation. Of course, the people that participated in my research knew what I was doing, knew that I was conducting this study on Vietnamese in Russia. But without a formal interview setting, without the presence of a recorder, they felt more relaxed and they became more honest and open to me.

Ali Moore: And of the traders that you met and you spent time with, is there a strata of traders, is there a very wealthy and really struggling and everything in between, or does everyone manage to earn the same amount of money? How different are the experiences?

Lan Ahn Hoang: There's a hierarchy among market traders in Moscow, as you can tell from the rental rates at different markets. The people who trade at Liublino market where the average rental rate is 20,000 US dollar a month. The traders who work at Lublino tend to be very wealthy, well stocked, and well established. Those who work at Yuzhynie Vorota or Southern Gates market struggle to make ends meet.

They are mostly new arrivals, new immigrants from very poor rural backgrounds in Vietnam, mostly in north central Vietnam. And many of them have transitioned from garment production. They used to work at illegal gammon factories in Moscow. And so life is really tough at Yuzhynie Vorota.

However, when you look at people's lives, where they live, how they maintain their daily routines, you cannot tell the difference between these very wealthy traders and those who are struggling to make ends meet, because they live in the same migrant hostel, they cook in the same communal kitchen, and they go to the market at five o'clock in the morning, and go home at six, 7:00 PM because of the sense of vulnerability and insecurity as a Vietnamese migrant in Russia, because of the fear of xenophobic, of racist attacks, people choose to live in very heavily crowded migrant hostels. Sharing communal spaces like toilets, bathrooms, and kitchen with other people, because that's where they can get the bought protection from local police.

Ali Moore: I want to look at that issue of xenophobia in a minute, but first, you write about a number of people saying to you, "I'm here to make money not to live." What is the ultimate goal? Is it to make enough money to go home, to enjoy life? Is it to make enough money to settle in Russia for good?

Lan Ahn Hoang: Most of the people who end up in Russia had no regular job in Vietnam, had no regular source of income. They tend not to have higher education qualifications or any specific skills, so they came to Russia because it was the most attractive option for them. And many made it. Many became US dollar multi-millionaires owning 10, 15 properties all over Vietnam and even in Moscow.

But unlike other contexts where you find large Vietnamese communities like the US or Australia, Russia is rarely mentioned as the final destination of my research participants. It is considered a phase in people's lives. It is where people can make a fast buck, can make money, and then there's life waiting for them out there beyond the market, beyond Russia. So even though they live in Russia for many years, for many decades, they do not consider applying for permanent residency, or naturalised as Russian citizen in Russia, because they feel like they don't belong to this society and they will never be accepted.

Ali Moore: Do some make their permanent home in Russia?

Lan Ahn Hoang: There are a smaller numbers of people who have settled down, but their permanent residency and Russian citizenship, because in Russia, you have to

buy everything. So they can become Russian citizen via the skilled immigration route or through marriage to a Russian national.

So some do that, but only as a measure of protection against police extortion. And I mentioned a small numbers of people who have settled down, bought their properties are sent for their children. So their children were brought to Russia and sent to local schools. They went to university, but then there's still a very keen sense of vulnerability and insecurity, especially with the Russian language skills and higher education qualifications. Even the children of these people struggle to find employment in the former economy due to racial discrimination. So if they can afford it, many choose to migrate to an anglophone country like Australia, or the US, or the UK.

Ali Moore: And when it comes to making money, the biggest competitors to the Vietnamese traders, are they the Chinese?

Lan Ahn Hoang: Yeah. Chinese are at the top of the game in Moscow markets. They have direct access to imports from China. And unlike the Vietnamese that I met in Russia, Chinese traders tend to come from places with very long, very deeply rooted culture of migration, centuries long culture of migration, and many of them are educated northerners who have access to international trading networks and state institutions.

Ali Moore: So do they do better than the Vietnamese, generally?

Lan Ahn Hoang: According to my Vietnamese research participants, the Chinese are more successful economically because they stick together. There's a belief that the Chinese have a greater community trust and solidarity. They protect each other, they look out for each other, unlike Vietnamese, each person is for themselves.

So that's how my research participants explain Chinese success at the market to me. But I think it's a more complex picture because the Chinese government is also very protective of their citizens rights in Russia. For example, when the Moscow government decided to close Cherkizovsky, or Cho Vom market, Chinese government sent delegates to Russia to negotiate, and they successfully persuaded the Moscow government to allow Chinese traders to ship their merchandise from the close of Cherkizovsky market. So their economic loss was minimum, unlike Vietnamese, they are often left to fend for themselves.

Ali Moore: So the Vietnamese embassy in Moscow doesn't pay any heed, doesn't look after these migrants?

Lan Ahn Hoang: I didn't have the opportunity to interview any staff of the Vietnamese embassy, but at the marketplace within the Vietnamese community in Russia, staff of Vietnamese embassy in Moscow were seen as thugs, not someone who was there to defend and protect the rights of Vietnamese nationals.

So staff at the Vietnamese embassy are very important players in the migration industry. They play a very important role and they earn very lucrative incomes from facilitating irregular migration to Russia. For example, in the recent coronavirus crisis, the Vietnamese traders at Sadovod had to pool their resources and assist the families who did not have any money to buy food, or to look after the children of the hospitalised traders. Vietnamese embassy did absolutely nothing.

And when there was the so-called humanitarian flight for Vietnamese to return to Vietnam during the pandemic, people had to register and apply for a spot on those flights with the Vietnamese embassy, but despite the name “humanitarian flight”, they had to pay a premium for their flight ticket.

Ali Moore: What happens to family members who are left behind in Vietnam? The family members of these traders who go to Russia, do they generally reap the benefits of having people overseas? Because you make a very interesting point that while migration almost always starts from family networks, it's those very networks that are actually rendered fragile by the migration process.

Lan Ahn Hoang: Most Vietnamese in Russia leave their children behind often with their elderly parents in Vietnam. These people maintain transnationally split family arrangements for many, many years, sometimes for two or three decades, they are separated from their children. If they can afford it, one parent, maybe a father or mother can buy a work permit that will allow them to travel and visit the children once a year, twice a year, but many people cannot afford it.

So a lot of my research participants related stories of family breakdown, rupture in intergenerational relationships and so on. There are some heartbreaking stories, marital disruptions, infidelity, and so on, but people are keenly aware that that's the price that they have to pay for the migrant dollar.

Ali Moore: And returning to the topic you raised earlier of xenophobic attacks, how do the Russians view the Vietnamese migrants beyond the wholesale purchasers who go into these markets? Is there any mingling between the Russians and the Vietnamese?

Lan Ahn Hoang: Barely any. So when I did my field work in Russia, I visited a few fellow academics – Russian academics – in Moscow, none of them had visited any of these migrant markets in Moscow and some were not even aware of their existence. So there's very little interaction between Russian population and migrants, mostly because of the lack of language skills on the part of migrants. And there has been very little qualitative in-depth research on the attitude of Russians to migrants.

But according to the quantitative surveys, the attitude to Chinese and Vietnamese migrants tend to be the most negative. Russians tend to have more favourable views of migrants from former Soviet Union republics like Tajikistan or Uzbekistan than people from outside the former Soviet Union.

Ali Moore: And you said earlier that there's obviously a real fear among the traders of xenophobic attacks if they're outside the market.

Lan Ahn Hoang: The xenophobic sentiments in Russia were particularly intense following the fall of the Soviet Union in the 1990s and early 2000s. The economic shock and the social chaos that followed the political turmoil made people very anxious. And so the rising sense of xenophobia, the fear of strangers of foreigners, in the literature, they talk about it as a Russian sense of insecurity and vulnerability that required an outlet for them to vent their anxiety and anger. So instead of the imperialist, now immigrants – foreign immigrants – become the new target for this hostility.

Ali Moore: And that was very much the case when you were there in far more recent times?

Lan Ahn Hoang: I didn't have any bad experiences in Russia, not at all. So according to surveys conducted by SOVA, an NGO based in Moscow, the incidents racially-motivated attacks have decreased sharply in the last 10 years, and apparently, economic growth, the economy boom, really helped. It led to a decrease in youth unemployment rates, and people became more confident about the future of the country and about the future of Russian economy.

But then the Vietnamese research participants that I talk with, they still remember the horrific murders and the attacks that their friends and families experienced earlier in the 1990s and early 2000s.

Ali Moore: The research participants that you spoke to, they obviously lead a very tough life. And then when you look at what you were telling us about how there is no integration with Russian society and indeed with these fears that have historical roots. The experience that these traders have in Russia, does the positive outweigh the negative, does the amount of money they can make outweigh these risks, or did your participants feel that maybe their lives were not better off? I mean, how did the balance fall?

Lan Ahn Hoang: I don't think any of them could tell me whether the loss outweighs the benefits, but remember that these people came from very poor rural backgrounds without any access to formal employment or income. The opportunity to make a massive amount of money in Russia is like once in a lifetime opportunity.

So even if they have already made it, they have invested in a very big number of properties in Vietnam, in Moscow, they cannot stop. Some of them tell me it's like heroin addiction, because they know that if they quit, if they leave Russia and go back to Vietnam, they will never have the same opportunity again.

So I'm talking about very wealthy, successful traders in Moscow, of course. There are many other people who are still struggling, who haven't made it, but even the poverty and the hardship give them even a stronger reason to stay because migration in Vietnamese culture is associated with financial success with economic success. So going home, returning home empty-

handed would bring shame to the family. So you would not be able to hold your head up high if you don't bring home a big mountain of money and buy a big house and show everyone how wealthy you are.

Ali Moore: It's an absolutely fascinating story, Lan, and thank you so much for joining us on Ear to Asia.

Lan Ahn Hoang: Thank you for the opportunity to talk about my research. It's been a pleasure.

Ali Moore: Our guest has been development researcher, Dr. Lan Ahn Hoang, from The University of Melbourne's School of Social and Political Sciences. And I should say that Lan's book, of course, that has just been published is *Vietnamese Migrants in Russia: Mobility in Times of Uncertainty*, and it's from Amsterdam University press.

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