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The *Voices from Central Asia* series is a platform for experts from Central Asia, Afghanistan, Azerbaijan, Mongolia, and the neighboring countries. The series promotes the diversity of opinions expressed by Central Asians and is a venue for researchers, senior officials, opposition figures, and civil society activists.

Debating Internal Migrations in Kyrgyzstan

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What are the main reasons behind internal migration in Kyrgyzstan, especially the flows from rural regions to cities and those from mountainous regions to valleys?

Aida Aaly Alymbaeva

The so-called great migration in Kyrgyzstan began in 1989 just before the collapse of the Soviet Union. With controls on mobility largely lifted as a result of perestroika, internal migration flowed from remote and mountainous areas, especially in the north, to the valleys and towns. The period 1990–94 saw the relocation of entire families—for example, from settlements in the Chui Valley such as Kemin to the capital Bishkek, or from the Naryn region to Kemin. The second stage of internal migration, from 1994 to 1999, saw continuing albeit decreased movements between regions and increased relocation from rural to urban areas. Today four main directions persist: from rural to urban areas, from remote mountainous areas to valleys, from the periphery to administrative and economic centers, and more generally from the south to the north. Of course, these vectors are intertwined and cannot be considered separately.

The northern and southern parts of Kyrgyzstan, and within them their respective urban centers and rural peripheries, display disparities in their social and economic levels of development. This

inequality arose during Soviet rule and has been exacerbated since independence. Another factor in the growing gap is differing levels of education, with the Chui Valley and the capital offering more high education institutions than the rest of the country. And while the difference in the levels of development propelled internal migration after independence, the low level of education of many migrants has contributed to their continued marginalization, along with the lack of employment opportunities in the cities.

Ownership of land and the ability to cultivate it also factored into levels of rural migration. In its 2007 report, *Kyrgyz Republic Poverty Assessment*, the World Bank noted the difference between the north and south in terms of land parcel sizes: land parcels in the less populated north were on average two hectares in size with 21 percent of the population owning at least one parcel of land; but in the more populated south in 2003, only 10 percent of people owned land parcels of this size. The prospect of larger plots of land available in the north, together with the attraction of what were perceived to be easier ways to earn money in urban areas, prompted large migratory movements from rural southern areas to Bishkek, and to a lesser extent to Osh and Jalalabad.

Keneshbek Almakuchukov

An International Organization for Migration (IOM) report from 2000, *Internal Migration in the Kyrgyz Republic*, cited the multiple economic, social, environmental, and political causes of internal migration. The search for a job and pursuing studies were quoted as the most important reasons by respondents of the IOM survey. Outmigration is particularly visible in mountainous regions where the socioeconomic situation is much worse. The poor condition of roads, irregular transport, and administrative barriers impede market access. The lack of access to television, radio, newspapers, good schools and universities, as well as adequate medical facilities have served as additional factors that motivate young people to migrate not only from rural to urban areas but also abroad. Labor migrants from the mountainous regions prefer to invest their earnings in the relocation of their families to lower-lying valleys and other areas where life is much easier than in the high mountains. Labor migration from the highlands may indeed herald the long-term collapse of Kyrgyz mountain communities.

Emil Nasritdinov

Economic reasons, such as a lack of jobs, shortage of land, and low incomes, are the most frequently cited by various experts and the media for migration. In addition, the poor state of infrastructure and shortage of basic services (education, medical treatment, and so on) are also important. Migration also occurs as a result of environmental degradation in risk-prone areas, which include communities affected by earthquakes, landslides, floods, droughts, and in some cases radiation from uranium tailing sites.

However, it is also important to see the phenomenon from a historical perspective. It can be argued that the current trends of migration are an outcome of the failure of Soviet collectivization and industrialization. In pre-Soviet times, the Kyrgyz lived as nomads that frequently moved along their pastoral routes. During the Soviet period, however, *kolkhozes* and *sovkhozes* were established for the purposes of managing and collectivizing agriculture, with the result that large numbers of Kyrgyz were forcefully settled. A completely new pattern of settlement in the regions emerged around this division of land, with new villages springing up in very remote areas. During Soviet times, agriculture was subsidized by the state and farmers received salaries even if the harvest was bad. The state administration addressed matters of entertainment and social life of residents and was responsible for their education and proper medical treatment. Specialists as well as recent university and college graduates were routinely sent to outlying regions as doctors, agrarians, and veterinarians. As a result, by the early 1990s, the rural regions of Kyrgyzstan had a stable growing population, and a very rigid system of *propiska* (residence permit) that did not allow rural residents to move freely to cities.

Once the Soviet Union collapsed, the land was privatized and divided equally among members of the sovkhozes and kolkhozes. By law the land still belongs to the state, but it is leased to farmers for a period of 99 years. However, with state support withdrawn, agriculture was no longer

subsidized and new owners had to rely only on their own resources to make a profit from working their plots of land. Not all farmers had the necessary means (machinery, fertilizers, seeds) to cultivate the land and many were given land in dry regions without irrigation. Pasture lands were also privatized and the return to animal husbandry made sense for many rural residents. However, contrary to pre-Soviet times, when there were no limitations on the movement of stock (as long as they stayed within the boundaries of the large pastures belonging to kolkhozes and sovkhozes), the new division of pasture lands significantly limited the amount of land available to individual stock owners for grazing their cattle. Their attempt to maximize profits from their pastures led to overgrazing and soil erosion, which also resulted in a higher frequency of floods and landslides. All these factors contributed to the economic crisis in the rural areas, leading to poverty and outmigration, both internal and external. The specific settlement pattern created by the kolkhozes and sovkhozes—and their redivision—cannot survive without state support.

What is the migration situation in small, provincial cities such as Naryn, Karakol, and Talas? As parts of their population leave for bigger cities and abroad, are migrants arriving from surrounding rural regions to take their place?

Keneshbek Almakuchukov

The official statistics on the internal movement of people cannot provide accurate data on internal migration due to the fact that it contains information only on migrants who have officially deregistered their home addresses and who have registered their arrival at a new destination. According to various surveys, at least 32 percent of internal migrants are not registered in their new places of residence, especially in the cities of Bishkek and Osh.

Kyrgyzstan faces a paradoxical situation. There has been a process of de-urbanization of most small and medium-sized towns and cities, which is indicative of the country's de-industrialization since the collapse of the Soviet Union. On the other hand, the capital city and the Chui region have witnessed hyper-urbanization—Bishkek has a population of one million equating to nearly 20 percent of the country's population—due to the massive influx of rural residents. Today the most popular destinations for internal migration are the cities of Bishkek and Osh, and the Chui oblast. A survey of potential migrants showed that 42 percent indicated their preference of relocating to Bishkek, 30 percent intended to move abroad, while 13 percent wanted to move to the Chui oblast. Whereas some "rural" suburbs of large cities and those rural areas easily accessible by transport from big cities may be experiencing population growth, the prospects for those small villages and settlements located far away from the large cities, and which are relatively difficult to access by transport, are bleak.

Emil Nasritdinov

There are several different types of small provincial towns in Kyrgyzstan and their fates and migration patterns vary. The worst scenario affects the remoter towns (often situated at the end of a road) such as the former mining towns of Ak-Tyuz and Kok-Jangak situated in the north and west of the country, respectively. Just as collectivization reorganized rural life and saw the emergence of new villages, these towns owed their existence to the Soviet industrialization process: mining towns in Kyrgyzstan—there are more than twenty of them—were built to exploit the country's minerals, coal, metals, and uranium, which were exported as raw materials to Russia and other Soviet republics. These industries were often unprofitable and were significantly subsidized by Moscow. With the collapse of the Soviet Union, the subsidies stopped and the mines were privatized. Driven by short-term profit, the new owners sold off the expensive machinery to Chinese and Kazakh entrepreneurs, while factory buildings (including some workers' apartments) were disassembled and sold as bricks. The factory workers were made redundant and with no other job prospects were forced to migrate. The majority of these residents were ethnic Russians. Many of them migrated to Russia, while some moved to Bishkek.

Other mining towns, especially those located on transport routes, fared slightly better. Residents

there have been able to engage in small-scale trade, such as in Tash-Komur located on the Osh–Bishkek road, or profit from the tourism industry, like Kadji-Say on the southern shore of Issyk-Kul. In other provincial towns, mostly regional administrative centers, the situation depended significantly on their location. Towns like Karakol and Balykchy have benefited significantly from the tourism industry around Lake Issyk-Kul; towns such as Kara-Suu, Uzgen, and Bazar-Korgon have profited from trade with neighboring Uzbekistan. Accordingly, migration from these towns has not been as marked as elsewhere. Similarly, towns in the Chui Valley, such as Tokmok, Kant, and Kara-Balta, have benefited from their proximity to Bishkek and even experienced inflows of migrants from the southern regions of Kyrgyzstan. However, provincial towns in the remote Batken and Naryn regions (like Isfana and Naryn) have fared much worse and have become depopulated as a result of outward migration.

Ruslan Rakhimov

Small provincial cities are the targets of internal migration from surrounding villages, with rural migrants trying to buy apartments in town. This small-scale migration is therefore a form of investment-based mobility. On the contrary, Naryn and other towns are not considered to be attractive prospects, because of their lack of economic development, and so do not entice villagers from surrounding areas. Moreover, migrants who leave their villages for regional centers do not often stay for long and seek to migrate to Bishkek or abroad relatively quickly. Regional cities are therefore regarded as merely stopovers on the way to larger migrant-recipient centers.

Does the Kyrgyz government have any policy to regulate internal migration, both in rural regions and in receiving cities?

Emil Nasritdinov

The previous governments ratified some programs for the development of regions and generating employment, but most of them were very small in scale and inefficient. The new government of Amazbek Atambayev, on the contrary, has announced ambitious plans of building a new railway through Kyrgyzstan, constructing hydroelectric dams, and attracting investors for exploiting the country's mineral wealth. They expect these projects to produce jobs and revive life in the regions. Some major agreements and contracts have already been signed, mostly with Russian firms. It remains to be seen how successful they will be in terms of rejuvenating the country's regions. In regard to the migrant-receiving cities, particularly Bishkek (the main destination for internal migrants), there is no specific government policy. While there is a law on internal migration, it does not impose any limitations on the freedom of movement inside Kyrgyzstan.

In my view, a careful resettlement policy should be considered. This policy should take into account the country's geopolitical situation, its topographical challenges, the existence of enclaves, and the incomplete delimitation and demarcation of its borders (excluding China with which agreements have been signed), as well as the low population density in the border areas. All these factors make Kyrgyzstan vulnerable to external threats. The unequal transport network and settlement of the country undermines its socio-cultural unity and connectivity between regions. Accordingly, any policy should take into account the need for a more balanced settlement of the country—not just the large population centers.

Ruslan Rakhimov

The Kyrgyz government has not devised any concrete policy regulations, but still there are some mechanisms to stem uncontrolled internal mobility through, for example, the fulfilling of certain requirements when buying land in provincial cities. There have also been some attempts to enforce regulations at the level of *ail okmotu* (local authorities) but the authorities lack the resources to do so. Moreover, the political system means that politicians tend to consider migrants as an important source of votes and, therefore, they are not keen to adopt any regulation that could see them lose popular support.

What are the main challenges faced by migrants living in the novostroiki of Bishkek's suburbs? Are the novostroiki becoming sites of potential political and social unrest?

Aida Aaly Alymbaeva

The history of Bishkek's novostroiki can be traced back to the end of the 1980s. Factory workers were the first to occupy plots of land, without official permission. Those who occupy land without legal title to it are called squatters, *samozakhvat* in Russian. In 1989, when the first wave of samozahvat occurred in Bishkek, most of the land claimed was connected to or situated close to the factories. Officials of the city were not able to control this process and finally legalized it through apportioning plots of land among workers according to existing property lines.

Novostroiki now occupy what were previously open fields and have contributed to the sprawl of the capital Bishkek. It is difficult to calculate the exact number of internal migrants who have moved to the capital because the relevant authorities in charge of this sector are unable to control it. For those who own a house in a suburban area, they first need to register their house and plot of land, which is complicated by multiple bureaucratic offices with overlapping mandates. For those who rent, the registration is a more complicated process. Yet the overwhelming majority of migrants are not required to register in municipalities when working in the informal sector or for renting rooms in the suburbs. Studies have indicated that there are as many as 300,000 inhabitants in the novostroiki, but this figure cannot reliably reflect the actual number of people who arrive and depart from the capital every season.

In Bishkek the majority of migrants are engaged in the bazaars, the biggest of which are Dordoy and Osh. These bazaars provide many small services like food outlets, salons, currency exchange booths, and telecommunications—all of which employ a large number of migrants. Another important kind of activity for male migrants is the transportation of goods for customers or sellers. Many women, on the other hand, work as cleaners in the bazaars. Some migrants are further engaged in the expanding private construction sector. While some form teams of workers, others just seek labor on a daily basis in low-skilled work. Sewing workshops are another essential sub-sector of informal labor involving a large number of women migrants. The next large segment is room rental, which is directly dependent on migration to the city. Depending on the income of a particular family owning a plot of land in one of the suburbs, especially those situated near a bazaar (like Kelechek), anywhere from one to a dozen rooms can be available for rent. Specially adapted to cater for migrants, such houses typically contain a number of rooms each with a separate entrance. Finally, several small kinds of informal business are to be found in the novostroiki: *bania* (bath-houses), *navoikana* or *tandyr* (a special oven for the round baked bread *lepyoshka*), small cafés, and shops of varying sizes commonly called *komok* (kiosk). A large number of komoks, navoikanas, and cafés can be observed along the main street of Kelechek.

Keneshbek Almakuchukov

In my opinion there is a need to tone down the media hype on depicting migrants as a challenge or a threat. They are simply Kyrgyz citizens searching for a better life for themselves and their children. Nevertheless, two main issues for migrants need be addressed: obtaining their residence permits (*propiska*) and getting access to medical care. However, the challenge seen from the point of view of the authorities is that Bishkek's infrastructure is experiencing extreme pressure, as it was not designed for the increasing volume of people and vehicles.

Emil Nasritdinov

The main challenges for migrants living in the novostroiki are related to registration of their plots, to the poor infrastructure (roads, electricity, water, gas, sewage), and access to basic social services (education, medical treatment, social security). If the property is legalized, many of the issues are somewhat easier to resolve. However, some novostroiki are built in places which cannot be legalized—Ak-Jar, Altyn-Kazyk, TEC-2, and parts of Ala-Too, for example. The illegal status creates many difficulties and frequently pushes

residents into taking political action, such as closing roads and protesting in front of Parliament.

I believe, though, that portraying novostroiki as places of political and social unrest has no solid basis. A large number of residents are hardworking traders in Bishkek's bazaars or workers in the growing apparel industry. Many have stable incomes and obtain support in the form of migrant remittances from Russia. Of course, they are subject to political manipulation, but they are not different in that sense from other city residents, and to date there is very little research evidence to show that novostroiki residents were particularly active in the last two revolutions (2005 and 2010) in Kyrgyzstan. With time the residents of the novostroiki will use their political connections, resources, and support from international organizations to improve the living conditions of their places of abode and so gradually transform the novostroiki into organic parts of the city.

Bermet Zhumakadyr kyzy

The main challenges faced by migrants living in Bishkek's novostroiki are the consequences of the illegal status of the new settlements. Some of these settlements lack or have no developed services such as running water, electricity, or paved roads. Furthermore, in cases such as Altyn Kazyk on the outskirts of Bishkek, there seems to be no hope in the near future of gaining legal status due to its location in an area classified as hazardous, which prevents the settlement from legally acquiring basic services. No less important is the daily stress these residents face: they live in uncertainty of whether their houses will be removed or if they will be granted legal status which will enable them to build their lives there.

It is not uncommon for novostroiki to be portrayed by the local media as places of political and social unrest. Although this is not entirely false, as was witnessed in the Aksu popular riots against the cession of territory to China in 2002, the revolutions of March 2005 and April 2010, and more generally during election periods, where the novostroiki saw protests, they are no more sites of potential political unrest than other parts of the city, the bazaars, or other regions of Kyrgyzstan. Furthermore, in terms of political mobilization and protests, which have the potential to lead to political and social unrest, it is necessary to distinguish between those novostroiki that are more politically active (whether through protests or lobbying politicians), such as Kalys Ordo or Ak Jar, and others which appear to be more apathetic and less prone to mobilization, like Altyn Kazyk.