

V. F. Yuchenkova,

Assistant Professor of the Preparatory department

Migration of Russian – Speaking People from Post-Soviet Kyrgyzstan in the 1990s

People have migrated since time immemorial. They moved in search of a better place to hunt, to live, in search of jobs and new opportunities. They moved driven by hunger, wars, epidemics, fear of persecution. According to the reasons of migration sociology differentiates voluntary (economic) and forced (political) migration. Migration of the Russian-speaking people from Kyrgyzstan after the collapse of the Soviet Union has had various reasons depending on the political, social and economic situation in the country.

Under the Soviet era any migration within the Soviet Union unauthorized by the state was limited by the so-called 'propiska', the obligatory registration at local police offices. Mass migration if any occurred was organized by the government due to political or economic reasons, for example the forced deporting to Siberia of dispossessed wealthy peasants in the 1930s, deportation of Germans, Crimean Tatars and Chechens to Central Asia and Kazakhstan during the Great Patriotic War, organized mass migration of young people to the virgin lands of Kazakhstan in the 1950s.

Among the by-products of political and economic collapse of the Soviet Union were uncontrollable migration processes. With perestroika came the growing sense of national identity. The formation of national states and national identities resulted in emergence of new national minorities which had to choose one of the 3 strategies available: "voice, exit or loyalty" to the new regime (Hirschmann). The chosen strategy depended on many factors and varied in the former Soviet republics. In Kyrgyzstan the main strategy chosen by the Russian-speaking population was exit, though to a lesser degree as compared with the reaction in other Central Asian states. It alternated with periods of relative loyalty depending on the situation in the country.

Before perestroika Kyrgyzstan had one of the most varied populations in the Soviet Union with over 80 nationalities represented which contributed to mutual tolerance and stability. The native population – the Kyrgyz – made up about 45% of the total 3.7 million living in Kyrgyzstan (1982). Up to the 1960s the country witnessed mainly in-migration, but since 1960 the percentage of Russian-speaking people has been constantly decreasing, the outflow within each decade being between 3.5 and 5.5% (Komsomol'skaya Pravda 12). The reasons were neither purely economic, nor political. The returnees were employees of the enterprises and organizations evacuated to Central Asia during the war, young specialists who had been sent to the republic to help building up national culture and industry, people who moved from province to central Russia in search for new opportunities.

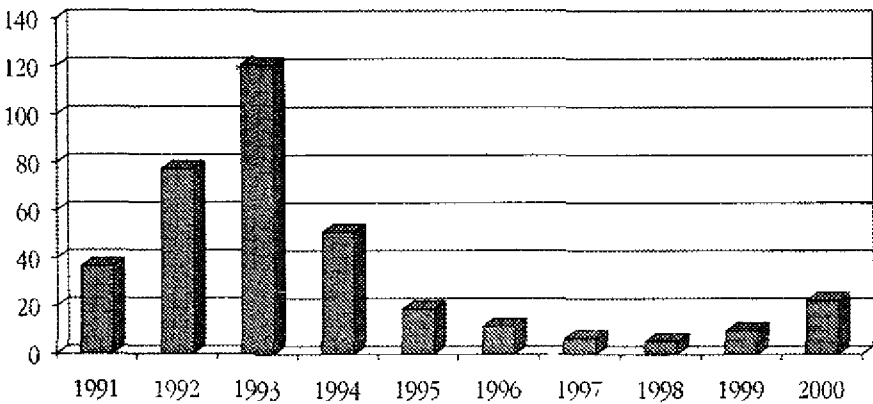
The main negative impact on migration processes was due to political, social and economic changes in the post-Soviet period. The mass exodus of the Russian-speaking (European) population correlated with the growing national self-consciousness, the formation of the national state. According to the Kyrgyz migration agency, the main migration outflow

started in the late 1980s and reached its peak in 1993 when nearly 121,000 people left the republic, including 81,000 Russians.

Thousand people

Figure 1

Out-migration of Russian-speaking people from Kyrgyzstan in 1991–2000



No matter how unexpected or unwilling independence was for Kyrgyzstan, the first years of the collapse of the USSR were characterized by the rising ethnic nationalist movement. Gary Marx and Douglas McAdam give a few reasons for emergence and proliferation of the nationalist movements. First, “collective action tends to develop within existing groups or established communities”, ethnicity being “the one basis of social solidarity that was not effectively eradicated by the Soviet regime”; second, successful nationalist movements in the Baltic states served a model for mobilization throughout the Soviet Union; third, vulnerability or receptiveness to challenge by the movement of the political system (124). All the three factors were present in Kyrgyzstan. Among the consequences of the successful social movements Marx and McAdam identify at least four: 1) new political or economic changes, 2) specific legislation, 3) changing in public opinion and behaviour, 4) the creation of new organizations or institutions. The changes in the republic in the period between 1989 and 1994 clearly indicate the tendency to form an ethnocratic state. The first stage of ethnocracy (1989 – the end of 1991) that influenced migration is characterized by the following main events:

- adopting the law of the state language;
- emergence of public organizations and political parties based on the ethnic principle;
- rising nationalistic sentiments with the 75th anniversary of the 1916 uprising;

Migration processes are influenced by a number of factors, but there is always an event that produces a “tipping effect” triggering “collective action”, namely, mass migration. The adoption of the law of the Kyrgyz language as the state language (1989) created ethnic discomfort for Russian-speaking people who, we must acknowledge, had a poor command of Kyrgyz. It also created a legal basis for prioritizing native speakers. Gradual squeezing Russians out of management began. From then on all Russian-speaking people have faced limited possibilities in professional issues. Even as late as 2001 the government officials had

to admit that Russian-speaking people had practically been ousted out of governmental, legislative bodies and legal institutions and numbered less than 10% in these bodies (Vechni Bishkek May 2001)

As response to the official policy the Slav Foundation was organized whose aim was to unite and protect the rights of the Russian-speaking people who did not intend to leave the republic. It partly helped to lower the number of migrants from 40,900 in 1994 to 36,600 in the following year. However, the national clashes between Kyrgyz and Uzbeks in the south of the republic in June 1990 contributed to the migration outflow. Though the immediate reason was the decision of the local authorities to build a cotton-processing plant on the lands traditionally owned, populated and cultivated by Uzbeks, and no Russians were involved in the conflict, this event had a negative impact on the sentiments of the Russian-speaking population. The adoption of the discriminating "Land Code" (1991) according to which "the land is the property of the Kyrgyz people" resulted in numerous cases of forcing country-cottages owners out of their plots of land, damaging their property by the native villagers. Another example of discrimination was the situation in the state farm "Prigorodny" near Bishkek with the majority of Russian-speaking employees. The lands of the farm were taken by the city authorities to build housing for the native in-migrants who had arrived from the mountainous regions in Bishkek. As a result, the employees of the farm were left jobless (Slavyanskije Vesti 1). Mass renaming of towns, villages, streets, thus wiping out all the signs of Slavs who had played an outstanding role in the history of the republic was also among the first steps of establishing a national state, national identity. All those events together with the above mentioned clashes in the south raised the migration outflow to 77,400 people in 1992.

The second stage of ethnocracy (the end of 1991-June 1994) is characterized by

- nativization of management and power bodies,
- collapse of big industrial enterprises with Russian-speaking labour force

The growing discomfort of the Russian-speaking people who have lost their position in management and jobs in the industrial sector contributed to their willingness to leave. Proclaiming independence and introducing national currency demonstrated that the country was going to break with the Soviet past. The dilemma facing the Russian-speaking people was more than choosing a place to live, but choosing a homeland and choosing citizenship. Nevertheless, it should be incorrect to completely ignore an economic factor during the first wave of migration. The economic crisis struck Kyrgyzstan most severely. Food shortage, food rationing, goods in short supply drove people to relatively stable Russia with its huge economic potential and more opportunities on its vast territories.

The mass migration of the population had its negative consequences. The European population of the republic was well-educated, according to Yurasov (Komsomol'skaya Pravda 12) in 1990 one of every 6 adults had higher education, while the percentage over the country was hardly over 10%. Evidently, among the first to leave were middle-aged well-educated specialists and qualified workers who constituted the overwhelming majority of the labour force in local industries "due to the tendency of the titular nationality to avoid certain occupations such as production-related employment because of the lower status such posts were accorded in traditional Central Asian society" (Smith 90).

It did not take the political leaders long to realize the negative impact of the forced migration on the economy and the image of the country which has always relied on the

international financial assistance, Russian, in particular. The authorities did their best to reduce migration. At first the efforts were of a merely restrictive character. There was a list of domestic things migrants were forbidden to take out of the country. The queues and prices to get a container at the railway station were huge. Attempts to create obstacles preventing migrants from selling their property were numerous. Suggestions of some People's Deputies to introduce an amendment to the Law of Property which was to limit the right of the apartment owners to sell their property within 5 years produced panic among the Russian-speaking people (Dyelo № 5). In small towns and villages native speakers agreed among themselves not to buy houses and apartments from the Russian-speaking people who intended to leave. As a result, people left having sold their property practically for nothing, many of them leaving their houses and apartments behind. However, it did not stop migration. At the end of 1992 the "Agreement about Friendship, Cooperation and Mutual Assistance between Russia and Kyrgyzstan" was signed, but it did not save the situation which was further aggravated by the government's decision to abolish the right of the army officers (mainly Russian-speaking) to privatize their housing (Yuzhny Kur'er 5).

The wave of migration that reached 120,600 people in 1993 aroused the anxiety of both the Russian and Kyrgyz sides. Opening the Slavic University in 1993 was to become a stabilizing factor. This idea was supported by the Russian and Kyrgyz governments and was the evidence of the good will of the Kyrgyz leadership. As Hilary Pilkington justly notes, one of the reasons for migration people gave was their concern for the future of their children. The possibility to study in the Russian-speaking University gave new perspective to non-native speakers.

Throughout the 1990s the Kyrgyz state had to face the dilemma of balancing nationalist demands with recognition of the economic and political importance of preventing huge out-migration. The Kyrgyz government, President Akaev in particular, should be given credit for taking a number of measures which guaranteed protection of the civil rights of the new "national minorities". In answer to numerous letters of the employees of large plants, public associations and citizens he vetoed the discriminatory "Land Code" and introduced the new formula that "the land is the property of the citizens of Kyrgyz and other nationalities constituting the people of the republic" (Slavyanskije Vesti 2).

Since 1994 the number of migrants began to constantly decrease from 51,100 in 1994 to 5,500 in 1998. This period is characterized by the changing policy toward the Russian-speaking population. New political slogans were adopted. The slogan "Kyrgyzstan is our common home" put forward by President Akaev was to demonstrate the peoples of the country that the republic remained a multinational state. The significance of the local migration regime can hardly be overestimated. In June 1994 the decree "On Measures to Regulate Migrational Processes in the Kyrgyz Republic" was the official acknowledgement by Kyrgyzstan's authorities – in contrast to other Central Asian republics – of the primary importance of social and political factors in inducing the out-migration of the non-utular population' (Bohr 151). The law simplifying the procedure of adopting Kyrgyz citizenship for those who return to the republic, the agreement between Russia and Kyrgyzstan "On Regulation Migrational Processes and Protection of the Rights of Migrants" (1995), and the four-lateral (Belarus, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Russia) agreement "On the Legal Status of the Citizens of the Country Residing in Another Country" (1998) played an important role in slowing down out-migra-

tion. The latter is of special significance, because in accordance to it Russian citizens in Kyrgyzstan (and vice versa) enjoy practically the same rights as Kyrgyz citizens: they have equal property rights, the rights to work, education, medical and social insurance and so on, with the exception to elect or be elected to the legislative bodies of the country.

Now practically no legal document contains discriminatory measures toward national minorities. The law of the official status of the Russian language, adopted in 2000, gained popularity for President Akaev who was reelected to his third term. A month before the presidential elections the most popular daily newspaper "Vecherni Bishkek" asked the readers "What kind of person should or shouldn't President be?" The survey of daily correspondence showed that from 38.5% (Vecherni Bishkek, 29 Sept) to 84% (Vecherni Bishkek, 6 Oct) of the respondents believed that the new President should not be a nationalist or racist. As one of the readers (Kyrgyz) pointed out, "Kyrgyzstan outgrew the children's disease of nationalism long ago. Now we are concerned with different problems. People will not tolerate any adventurers". Best of all the popular sentiments were expressed by the reader who wrote, "You can never guess what my nationality is by my surname ("Iskhakov", one of the most common family names in Central Asia). I may be Kyrgyz, Russian or Tatar. And it does not matter, because we, Iskhakovs of all nationalities, are children of the people of Kyrgyzstan. We need President – internationalist" (Vecherni Bishkek, 29 Sept). As another reader Imanov points out, Akaev proved his internationalism by his actions and he is in a more advantageous position than his opponents. Shakir Sadatkanov, a former teacher, on his own initiative visited villages of the Issyk-kul region where he had worked and made a survey which showed that the majority of the respondents supported Akaev (Vecherni Bishkek, 6 Oct).

The good will of the political leadership in the settlement of national issues makes the republic unique among the post-Soviet states. At the meeting in May 2001 Presidential administration and governmental officials discussed the problem of out-migration and expressed their concern that migration of Russian-speaking population weakened the intellectual level of Kyrgyzstan. The officials had to admit that along with economic reasons the cadre policy which had ousted Russian-speaking specialists out of the state institutions was the main reason for migration. The migration problem was recognized as a priority of the domestic policy of the state. Unfortunately, the policy of the government was "reactive" (the term suggested by Richmond cited by Hilary Pilkington). It failed to anticipate the events provoked by thoughtless decisions of the first years of independence, though it is laudable that the leadership of the republic reacted positively to migration processes. The Russian authorities, on the contrary, were slow to react to the situation. Only in July 1998 the State Duma demonstrated its attitude to the countrymen through the decision on the draft law "On the State Policy toward Compatriots Abroad". Russia was also the last of the four countries to ratify the four-lateral agreement "On the Legal Status of the Citizens of the Country Residing in Another Country".

The outflow of migrants was going down up to 1999 that witnessed the third wave of migration, which tends to grow. The out-migration of 9,900 people in 1999 rose to 22,500 migrants in 2000. However, these figures may include native speakers who move to Russia in search of jobs (according to unofficial data, there are about 400,000 Kyrgyz people living in Russia), which may indicate to the fact that migration has acquired semi-voluntary character, the more so as many Russians residing in Kyrgyzstan also seek mainly job opportunities in Russia.

The leaders of the republic have taken unprecedented measures to stop migration. During Akaev's visit to Russia the "Declaration of the Eternal Friendship, Partnership and Cooperation", the "Agreement of Economic Cooperation for 2000-2009" were signed. The President's decree "On Additional Measures to Regulate Migrational Processes" was issued. In 2001 the amendment to the Constitution of the official status of the Russian language was introduced. The new wave of migration is not connected with nationalizing policies, though nationalism by "stealth" (Bohr 142) still takes place. This new outflow is caused by several reasons. First, reunification with the relatives settled in Russia, the process of settling usually taking about 7-8 years. Second, as Joma Nazpary notes, "the massive emigration has led to people losing parts of their valuable contacts", weakening networks which served as a surplus of resources for survival (Nazpary 87). This factor contributed to making a decision to leave. The third factor is economic instability, mass unemployment, low living standards and the increasing average wealth differential between Russia and Kyrgyzstan. In 1999 an average monthly salary in Kyrgyzstan was \$25.5, while in Russia \$61.8 (Vecherni Bishkek, 20 May). The recent considerable rise in pensions and salaries of the federal employees in Russia makes Russians think of better opportunities in their historical homeland. Last but not least, there were also political factors behind the new wave of migration. Among the most significant political events influencing migration were the Baiken events in the south of the republic, where there was a threat of terrorist group intrusion, and Putin's election as President. The threat of the war was as great a pushing factor as hopes for the revival of Russia under Putin were a pulling factor.

There is also an interesting assumption Eric Hoffer puts forward, that I find quite appropriate for the situation with migration in general. "Migration can serve as a substitute for a mass movement", because emigration offers some of the things the frustrated hope to find when they join a mass movement, namely, change and a chance for a new beginning" (Hoffer 28). My personal experience and evidence of the returnees to Kyrgyzstan like myself, as well as sad stories of those who have not found the "promised land" in Russia, but are not able to return, demonstrate that mass migration is not always determined by reason. People join others in a common undertaking not so much to ensure the success of their own project, but following "the others" whose decision to leave may be better grounded.

As Hoffer indicates, "mass movements are often a factor in the awakening and renovation of stagnant societies" and "in large and heterogeneous social bodies such as Russia, the process of awakening and renovation depends on the presence of some widespread fervent enthusiasm which perhaps only a mass movement can generate and maintain" (Hoffer 149). Though it was said long before perestroika, it is quite applicable to the analysis of the present situation. Unfortunately, neither in Kyrgyzstan, nor in Russia there was a leader who could use mass migration as an instrument of the renaissance. Russian-speaking migrants who realized their national identity and their will to start a new life, and to work for the benefit of the newly found motherland could become such an instrument to stir up the general apathy of Russian society. Instead, as Pilkington's research shows they are treated as the "fifth columnists", as alien elements among their countrymen. My own experience as Vice-President of the Association for Migrants and Refugees in Togliatti, a large city on the Volga, where I lived for more than 4 years, supports Pilkington's conclusion. The official policy toward migrants does not contribute to successful settling down. The migrants who are mostly urban specialists with higher education are encouraged to settle in rural areas and are not

welcomed in cities. Money provided by the Federal authorities for migrants' needs are allocated for building housing mostly in rural areas where urban specialists face inevitable difficulties with employment. First feelings of pity and sympathy for newcomers are soon replaced by envy, suspicion, animosity of the locals, especially when the newcomers' efforts to settle down are successful. The negative feelings are even stronger in the countryside where the population is severely hit by Russia's economic crisis. The property of the newcomers is often destroyed, put on fire. I know several families who were forced to return to Kyrgyzstan after having suffered from the hostility of the local people. The reasons are that Russian migrants are usually more qualified and educated, they had higher living standards in Kyrgyzstan which makes them the object of envy. Even from the city administration staff in Togliatti I heard, "You lived well there, why have you arrived here?"

Of no less importance is the fact that such typical Russian habits as drinking, swearing, lack of respect for women and elderly people are especially disgusting to Russians who grew up in a more restrictive Asian culture. The willingness of migrants to restore their standard of living, their habit of working hard that helped them to survive in the competitive atmosphere of a national republic, is a challenge to laziness and apathy of the local Russians who view the newcomers as competitors. Specific manners, habits, values of "Kyrgyz" Russians rooted in this multinational environment alienate the newcomers from the locals. As Hillary Pilkington puts, as a historical homeland, Russia turned out to be a "cultural backwater rather than a metropole" (192). Even foreign researchers have noted with surprise that among Russians "...a sense of solidarity with co-ethnic members of other countries is conspicuously weak or non-existent" (Smith 77).

Disillusioned by cold reception in their historical homeland, and having realized their "otherness", many Russians return to Kyrgyzstan. During all these years there was but little inflow of returnees from Russia. According to the representative of the Russian Ministry for National and Migrational Policies Assauliyuk, during 2000-2001 over 4,000 people arrived in Kyrgyzstan from Russia (Argumenty I Facy 3). If the economic situation in the republic changes for the better, the migration outflow will decrease. Moreover, more inflow may be expected, the more so as the migration policy of Russia has been aimed at rather keeping out unwanted migrants and encouraging them to stay where they are.

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