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Bishkek, Kyrgyzstan

**Social Research Center at the
American University – Central Asia**

Lecture:

Migration in the Kyrgyz Republic: Current Situation and Challenges

On February 27, 2008 an open lecture by Sergey Masaulov, a system analyst of the Bishkek-based Social Technology Center, on *Migration in the Kyrgyz Republic: Current Situation and Challenges* was held at the American University – Central Asia.

In his lecture, the speaker raised the following points:

1. *Human flows* as a natural phenomenon in the modern world.
2. Establishing partner relations between Kyrgyzstan as a country exporting manpower and countries receiving migrants from Kyrgyzstan in order to legalize labor migrants.
3. Regulating labor migration.
4. Technical backwardness of public sector management. Old-fashioned nature of public administration technologies. Need for advanced steps in the area of management technologies.

Human flows

In the beginning of his lecture, the speaker made an overview of the current migration issues in the Kyrgyz Republic. As he pointed out, nowadays migration, both internal and external, is a comprehensive and indiscriminately developing phenomenon. First of all, it has to do with people leaving the country on a regular basis, looking for a job and better life, and the rural population moving to larger urban areas. External labor migration primarily hits such neighboring countries as Russia and Kazakhstan, where dynamic economic growth is observed. Given poor economic development of our country, the able-bodied population no doubt has to seek employment in countries with better job opportunities. As a result, many labor migrants from Kyrgyzstan find better jobs and set up public organizations, such as diasporas.

It may be worthwhile to mention that in the era of globalization a whole layer of the able-bodied population moves to other regions. The world order, under the circumstances, changes so that in the next one hundred to two hundred years we can observe what may be called the Great Migration. According to the analysts, the population size will become stable in two hundred

years, and subsequently *human flows* will become stable, too. Nowadays, the *human flows* are obvious, and the movement of human resources seems inevitable. The findings of numerous foreign studies are indicative of a certain trend in the flow of human resources, which today go from the East to the West. This trend has affected Kyrgyz citizens, too. We can observe significant colonies of labor migrants from Kyrgyzstan far abroad. For instance, there are people from Kyrgyzstan working in the service sector of Great Britain, former Czechoslovakia, and Italy. Notably, Kyrgyzstani citizens started settling in the United States since the 1990s, when the public was given a chance to study and work abroad.

Most remarkably, Kyrgyz migrants turn out to be particularly flexible, being able to change, adapt to the offered conditions and work under any circumstances. To illustrate his point, the lecturer mentioned a special observation conducted by the Social Technology Center in one of the settlements in Ryazan oblast (Russia). The new part of this settlement, inhabited by people from Kyrgyzstan (not only the ethnic Kyrgyz, but Kyrgyzstanis), experienced higher well-being and living standards than the old one. The way Kyrgyzstani people treat labor accounts for this apparent imbalance. The migrants make every effort to earn money, no matter how hard their work is, whereas the local population is not used to engage in physical labor as vigorously. Therefore, looking at their relatively well-off Kyrgyzstani neighbors, they say, “If you live an affluent life like the Kyrgyz do, it is not bad at all.”

Since migration can be both external and internal, today we can observe mass resettlement of Kyrgyzstanis inside the country. For the most part, people from remote areas tend to move to Chui oblast and Bishkek in particular. Such movements support the statement about the existence of *human flows*. In the near future this process will clearly continue. People move to those places where they can find better employment, live and better provide for their families.

Legalization of labor migrants

According to different data, as of 2005 about half a million labor migrants from the Kyrgyz Republic had worked in Russia and Kazakhstan, with another 30 thousand working in other foreign countries. Notably, **only 10% of Kyrgyzstani citizens are legalized** in their new place of residence. Accordingly, legal migrants are involved in skilled labor with relatively high wages, while illegal migrants are doing unattractive low-paid work where no special qualification is required. The overwhelming majority of Kyrgyz migrants falls into the second category. There is a standard employment scheme of such workers, which is done through the same channels and employers, and in the same sectors of economy.

As emphasized by the speaker, the size of remittances from labor migrants today can be compared to the national budget revenues, which has been the case over the last several years. It

is no secret that labor migrants are turning into one more economic resource, which, similar to such economic sectors as power industry and gold-mining, can become a source of significant revenue to the state.

However, we need to pay close attention to the issue of arranging labor migrants' departure to other countries. One of the key points raised by Mr. Masaulov in his lecture was a suggestion to establish partner relations between the Kyrgyz Republic as a country of origin and recipient countries, which may significantly promote the development of regional labor markets. The speaker also noted that a special system of dispatching specialists abroad for temporary work is being formed in that part of the service sector which deals with facilitating legal employment. Indeed, according to Kyrgyz laws, the State Committee on Migration and Employment does not have the right to export workforce. As a result, non-governmental employment agencies spring up in the country, dealing with dispatching labor migrants abroad. In this area, however, quite important is the issue of qualified trainings for labor migrants. Given a surfeit of unskilled labor in receiving countries and growing competition in international labor markets, in the countries exporting manpower preference will be given to people with higher skills and better professional training.

The speaker suggested three important steps that need to be taken to address this problem:

1. Reforming the system of vocational education in the Kyrgyz Republic should be viewed as a priority.
2. It is important to develop a special policy aimed at mobilizing the intellectual and financial resources of Kyrgyz diasporas abroad.
3. Mechanisms stimulating the transfer of skills and re-integration of migrants should be formulated.

Labor immigration

In the next part of his presentation, the lecturer spoke about labor migration. According to Mr. Masaulov, in recent years the number of foreign citizens coming to Kyrgyzstan for work has been on the rise. A WTO member, Kyrgyzstan can import goods from other WTO countries without any customs fees. Therefore, the largest wholesale trade meant to target all Central Asian states takes place in our country. Cheap Chinese goods go to Uzbekistan, Kazakhstan, Tajikistan and other CIS countries through wholesale markets of Kyrgyzstan. Another important factor is a possibility to freely bring in and out any currency, as well as to exchange it. Immigrants working in the Kyrgyz Republic are attracted by the aforementioned conditions.

Thus, our country has also become prone to legal and illegal migration. Notably, the majority of migrants working in Kyrgyzstan come from China.

The speaker also mentioned that immigrants are mainly located in the south of the country (Kara-Suu). By official estimates, there are about 23 thousand migrants from China registered in the Kyrgyz Republic. According to the Social Technology Center, the number of legal and illegal migrants is about 100 thousand people. The majority of external migrants are Uighurs, an ethnic group from the Uighur Autonomous Region in China.

The speaker recommended the Kyrgyz Government to regulate immigration with the labor market conditions in mind.

Internal labor market

The internal labor market is also changing, characterized by a lack of highly skilled construction workers and those with a technical background. Today in Kyrgyzstan we have a real army of certified lawyers and economists who can't find high-paid jobs, since the market calls for qualified construction workers and bricklayers, experts in the area of construction and service delivery.

“Given the construction of the Kambarata hydropower station, we could easily provide jobs to many people in Kyrgyzstan,” the speaker said. “Our country is the only country in Central Asia where vocational and technical training has been preserved officially, and we need to take up this opportunity in order to rejuvenate vocational training schools. For example, today we have only one school where cabinetmakers are trained. It's vocational and technical school 4. After getting their certificates and practicing their skills a little, the graduates of this school go to Russia, where they are hired by good furniture- or parquet-producing companies. And they make a lot of money. The government should respond to what experts are in demand,” he added.

Obviously, those countries that are able to achieve advanced capitalization of public relations (challenge 1) and turn the human capital into social capital (challenge 2) will benefit from the effects of economic globalization.

Today the human capital does not become the country's capital. Concrete solutions should be found in Kyrgyzstan that would enable us to use the country's human capital effectively. It is not enough to provide people with education. The question should be, how and where can this expertise be used? How do we prevent the loss of highly skilled workers? What needs to be done to help people receiving education in their own country apply their knowledge in the same country?

Changing the management technology

At the end of the lecture, the speaker drew some conclusions and defined the tasks faced by Kyrgyzstan.

Setting up a modern social structure with the social capital based on it is important for promoting competitiveness in any country in the first quarter of the 21st century. In this context, today Kyrgyzstan is facing a relevant task in advancing management technologies from line to functional and from matrix-based to corporate management. Apparently, most of system limitations are caused by technological backwardness in the area of public sector management. Public administration technologies remain obsolete, with budgetary process being the only technology applied today. Public administration is based on various verticals, or poorly coordinated hierarchical structures. The actions undertaken lack clear understanding of general things, as well as some common vision of the goals and acceptable ways to achieve them. As a result, there is a lack of coordination and gaps in performing specific managerial functions among different branches of power and state institutions. Many managerial methods and relevant authorities, which are already out of date, were inherited from the Soviet times. There are a number of new tasks outside management and regulation, which have arisen as a challenge to the public administration system. Changes in the area of migration turned out to be one the major objective challenges.