

Kyrgyzstan and the Eurasian Economic Union: implications for migration by Anna Alekseyeva

The Eurasian Economic Union constitutes a shift in relations between post-Soviet states. Although the agreement has been agreed upon and signed by heads of state, Alekseyeva considers its impact for everyday citizens in potential member state Kyrgyzstan. Despite the promised economic benefits, Alekseyeva argues that numerous challenges and pitfalls will arise if Kyrgyzstan accedes to the EEU.

In May, Kyrgyzstan's president, Almazbek Atambayev, [finally agreed](#) to Kyrgyzstan's accession to the Eurasian Economic Union (EEU) – a customs union between Russia, Kazakhstan and Belarus. The EEU, led by Russian President Vladimir Putin, constitutes an effort to solidify Russia's economic and political influence in the East and to create an economic counterforce against the encroaching European Union.

Kyrgyzstan is already heavily integrated into Russia's economy; an estimated [20 percent](#) of Kyrgyzstan's population travels abroad to find work, with the primary bulk of labor migrants ([92 percent](#)) going to Russia. As a result, Kyrgyzstan is one of the most remittance dependent countries in the world. Last year, the Eurasian Development Bank estimates that Kyrgyzstan received [\\$1.9 billion in remittances](#) from abroad, which amounted to almost a third of the country's GDP.

How will Kyrgyzstan's membership in the Eurasian customs union impact the migration situation in the country? What will happen when barriers to movement become even lower? Who will remain in the country? These are the questions that have troubled many Kyrgyz migration experts since discussion of entering the customs union first began.

The majority of Kyrgyz migrants originate from the three southern provinces of Jalal-Abad, Batken and Osh, reflecting the uneven level of development between Kyrgyzstan's north and south. Internal migration from south to north is also significant, with many young people moving to Bishkek to find low skilled work. Migration generally occurs up to the age of 35, and the [average age](#) of labour migrants is 29.

The high level of outmigration has already created a dire situation in the south of the country. As is typical in countries with high labour outmigration, the large numbers of young people leaving Kyrgyzstan to work has resulted in brain drain and the virtual disappearance of the country's most valuable segment of labourers. With so many workers moving away, certain sectors in the country's economy are finding themselves understaffed. In some areas of Kyrgyzstan, Tajik migrants work agricultural jobs that have been left vacant by Kyrgyz migrants looking for better work abroad.

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The separation of young families, sometimes for years at a time, leads to the disintegration of social and familial relations. Stories of husbands going abroad for work and starting new families in Russia are common. This puts the wives who are left behind – oftentimes living with their husbands’ families – in a vulnerable position. In Kyrgyzstan, the Center for Migration at the Russian Academy of Science estimates that [30 to 40 percent](#) of migrants are female, an unusually high proportion compared to the Tajik and Uzbek migrant pools. This adds an extra layer of social complexity; both parents leave children behind in the care of elderly grandparents. These social orphans, as they are called, are more vulnerable to physical and sexual abuse.

Various estimates from the Eurasian Development Bank and other observers predict that Kyrgyzstan’s entry into the Eurasian customs union will increase outmigration from the country anywhere from [3.5 to 15 percent](#). Upon Kyrgyzstan’s accession to the union, Russia has promised to eliminate migrant quotas and to grant amnesty to illegal Kyrgyz migrants residing within its borders, essentially decimating the largest barrier currently stemming the flow of migrants into Russia. (It is interesting to note that this openness represents a 180-degree reversal from the Russian government’s [widespread anti-immigration fervor](#) of last fall.)

The customs union will likely precipitate other changes in Kyrgyzstan’s labour market, leading the country further down the path of dependency. A significant portion of Kyrgyzstan’s economy currently relies on trade with China through the re-export of Chinese goods to Russia, Kazakhstan and other Former Soviet Union states. Kyrgyz traders make profits by importing Chinese goods cheaply as a result of Kyrgyzstan’s near-zero tariff rates for Chinese products and re-selling the products to countries that have higher customs duties for Chinese imports.

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According to the World Bank, traders at the Dordoi bazaar outside of Bishkek – the largest market in Central Asia – amassed an annual turnover of [\\$2.9 billion in 2009](#) by exploiting this competitive advantage. However, this advantage will be lost once Kyrgyzstan enters the customs union and tariffs on Chinese goods increase. Higher tariffs may also stifle Kyrgyzstan’s burgeoning textile industry, which employs somewhere from [seven to 14 percent](#) of the country’s working population. This sector, which exports primarily to Russia, relies on cheap fabric imported from China.



Dordoi Bazaar outside of Bishkek

Source: Wikimedia

The Kyrgyz labour market will have to adjust to the re-orientation of Kyrgyzstan towards Russia and away from China. As more workers look to Russia as the only source of opportunity, even the labour markets that are currently operating successfully in Kyrgyzstan will see major disruptions.

The Kyrgyz government has secured a [promised \\$377 million](#) from Russia and Kazakhstan to implement its road map to Eurasian accession. However, despite this help, Kyrgyzstan is likely to see major changes, which have the potential to further drain the country of its most vital resource – human labour power. Many in Kyrgyzstan speak of the energy of return-migrants, who return to their native country with new skills, entrepreneurial energy and with broadened social horizons. Without the proper infrastructure back, however, these assets cannot be harnessed.

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A travel agency in Moscow specialized in flights to Central Asia
Credit: Eurasian Dialogue

Similarly, whilst remittances undoubtedly make an important contribution to the country’s economy, the question of how these remittances are invested has been a much-discussed problematic in Kyrgyzstan, as well as other remittance-dependent countries. Investment in houses, cars and the ritual economy create social norms around ‘modern’ and consumption-oriented lifestyles, creates further push factors that perpetuate the migratory cycle. However, these investments do not address the fundamental infrastructural, economic and educational problems that initiated the migratory flows in the first place.

Kyrgyzstan might be entering the Eurasian Economic Union with a view to achieving longer-term development objectives and due to a lack of other options, but it will have to reckon with the consequences of this accession in the immediate future.

Anna Alekseyeva is a Ph.D. candidate at the University of Oxford. Her work on the post-Soviet space has been published in academic journals, policy papers and by media outlets. In 2010, she wrote the human rights profile on Tajikistan for Human Rights Watch’s *World Report*. Most recently, Anna was a Visiting Scholar at the Central Asian Studies Institute at the American University of Central Asia in Bishkek.