

To Remain or to Return: The Role of Gender, Family Structures, and Uncertainty in Contemporary Kyrgyz-Russian Labour Migration

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ABSTRACT

This paper explores how labour migration flows between Kyrgyzstan and Russia influence Kyrgyz family structures, gender norms and perceptions of uncertainty. I investigate the consequences for Kyrgyz society of mothers leaving their children behind to work abroad, of men returning from Russia to find new ways to maintain their roles as sole providers of the family, and the societal stigma faced by women who migrate for economic reasons. These topics are drawn from my ethnographic research conducted in August of 2023 with migrant workers and specialists working at international development organisations in Bishkek, Kyrgyzstan. The primary goal of this study is to investigate Kyrgyz labour migration patterns in order to better understand how fear and aspirations towards leaving the home country and returning are justified and pursued, particularly in light of the added uncertainties stemming from forced mobilisations currently targeting Central Asians (and specifically Kyrgyz) in Russia.

Keywords: Labour migration, uncertainty, gender roles, Central Asia, Kyrgyzstan

It is lunchtime in Bishkek, Kyrgyzstan. Feeling hot from the August sun, I enter a traditional Kyrgyz restaurant to meet up with my friend and her family. As I sit down at the table, Zhyldyz, with whom I had scheduled an interview, joins us. Zhyldyz is a waitress at the restaurant and has been working there ever since her return from Moscow in 2022. She also happens to be a relative of my friend. After catching up for a bit, Azamat, the other waiter, brings us our food. We eat and continue our casual conversation. "How was life in Russia like?" I ask Zhyldyz. "The first month was the hardest. I cried during the nights; I missed my children. I called them and my mom on WhatsApp, but since she lives in the mountains, the internet kept cutting off. I also noticed how tight a community of Uzbeks formed in Russia. I rarely saw my folks treat each other as kindly."

We exchange more words, and my friend pours us all more tea. I ask Zhyldyz what made her want to return. "When my daughter turned seven and was about to enter school, I decided to move back to Kyrgyzstan. My mother was getting old. Of course, I wanted to be close to my family. The pay in Moscow was good, yes, but the city was grey and there was rarely time for anything other than work. I like the mountains and the nature, the quiet living." Zhyldyz calls over the other waiter, Azamat, who joins us at the table. He is slightly younger than Zhyldyz, in his mid-20s. "Azamat also has a story to share about his time working in Moscow," Zhyldyz tells me. I ask him to tell us more. After describing in length how hard it was to secure a job without Russian citizenship, he tells me about a conversation he once had with a rich Muscovite:

At the fancy restaurant I worked in Moscow, customers often left me generous tips, sometimes around 500

rubles for just a coffee. Since I had a hobby of collecting watches, I'd often compliment the watches our customers wore. I remember one instance when a customer handed me his Rolex to wear. I later found out it was worth 10 million rubles. He told me, 'Azamat, keep it on your wrist for a while. Maybe one day, you'll own something like this once you've started your own business.' We had a long conversation, but after I realised the value of that watch, I got scared and gave it back. I think these types of interactions really inspired me. Moscow is a busy city, but it offered me a lot of potential for growth. I liked how you could get any service quickly and everything was more technologically advanced. Social life was good there, and you weren't spending ridiculous money on family gatherings like you would in Kyrgyzstan. In the end, I had to return to Kyrgyzstan because of the military mobilization in Russia that started that year. But I think that although I liked Moscow, if I were to only listen to my soul's desires, I would not live there my whole life.

Labour migration — the process of movement across and within state borders for the purpose of employment (International Organization for Migration [IOM] 2019) — presents both unique opportunities for migrants and unknown outcomes. In Kyrgyzstan, cross-border labour migration has become an ingrained part of society, shaping individual life courses and family dynamics. According to recent data, every fourth household in the country has at least one labour migrant working abroad and sending remittances back home (United Nations 2022). Most of these workers, up to 85 percent, migrate to large cities in the Russian Federation, driven by economic factors such as higher wages and better career prospects (IOM 2021a).

These motivations align well with neoclassical migration theory, which views migration as a rational economic decision to maximise income while minimising costs (Massey et al. 1998). However, while economic incentives remain significant, migration

decisions are also shaped by a combination of fears, societal traditions, and state policies. The longstanding relationship between Kyrgyzstan and Russia under the Soviet Union has created enduring economic and linguistic ties that continue to facilitate migration flows between the two countries. However, the war in Ukraine has disrupted this strategy of movement, with many male workers now deciding to return to Kyrgyzstan or relocate to other countries to avoid military conscription. Decisions to migrate are, therefore, more complex than what neoclassical economics theory would teach us. They have to do with fear, tradition, and what my discussion with Zhyldyz and Azamat reveals — gender norms.

The stories told by my interlocutors helped me understand and decipher the ways in which labour migration from Kyrgyzstan to Russia impacts family dynamics and gender norms in modern-day Kyrgyzstan. In addition to the gendered aspects of migrating to Russia, uncertainty emerges as another important theme throughout this paper. Defined as a condition where “knowledge about the future is unknown, even when the possible outcomes are known,” uncertainty permeates the migration process and shows itself in new forms depending on the stage of the migrant’s departure (Stirling 2010, 1029). For women, the uncertainty associated with leaving their families to seek economic opportunities abroad is often compounded by societal assumptions such as the perceived promiscuity of female labour migrants working in Russia. In contrast, I observed that, for male migrants, these feelings of uncertainty stemmed from more material concerns such as securing decent work, avoiding the Russian blacklist because of insufficient work documents, or, more recently, ending up being forcibly mobilized to the frontlines in Ukraine by the Russian government. Coming back home or moving elsewhere appear to be the only safe options left for Kyrgyz male workers in Russia, revealing emerging uncertainties over the stability of the sole provider role within the family unit.

Through my ethnographic research conducted in August of 2023 in Bishkek, Kyrgyzstan, I aim to capture the everyday realities of men and women navigating this

uncertain terrain. My fluency in Russian enabled me to conduct in-depth interviews with locals and build meaningful connections without language barriers. However, I remained mindful of my position as a half-Russian researcher in Central Asia and acknowledged that relying on English and Russian for communication may have limited my grasp of certain nuances apparent in the Kyrgyz language. Having previously travelled to Kyrgyzstan to visit my friend’s family and explore the country, I was already familiar with the environment and the social context in which I conducted my interviews and participant observations.

This research is further enriched by the perspectives of international development specialists introduced to me by my friend’s family. Their insights provide a multifaceted view of the current dynamics between development policy and the emerging challenges faced by migrant workers in Russia. At the heart of this paper are the stories of labour migrants — their experiences living abroad, their justifications for returning, and their perspectives on migration. By incorporating the uncertainty migrants face into the analysis of labour migration to and from Kyrgyzstan, this work aims to contribute to the academic discourse on migration. It also offers a snapshot of the precarious livelihoods of many Kyrgyz families dependent on Russia. Ultimately, this paper invites readers to view migration through a lens that recognises the inherent inequalities of cross-border movement and the resilience of those who confront them.

Context

There is much to say about the role that labour migration plays in Kyrgyzstan, as well as the role of women within these migratory processes. Kyrgyzstan ranks among the top recipients of remittance flows in the world, with a substantial portion of its GDP — nearly 30% — derived from money sent home by migrants (World Food Programme [WFP] 2021). Since much of this migratory and financial flow is undocumented, Kyrgyz economic dependency on remittances is hard to track and could, therefore, be much higher than what official

sources estimate (International Federation for Human Rights [IFHR] 2016). The reasons for such a large population of labour migrants being undocumented stem from the administrative bureaucracies and high costs of obtaining legal migrant worker status in countries of arrival (Reeves 2013a). Kyrgyz dependency on remittance money is, however, not purely a financial aspect; it is a deeply ingrained tool of livelihood for many families. Such dependency raises critical questions about household dynamics, family planning, and the power imbalances stemming from economic, social, and political reliance on another country.

The most significant ‘push factor’ — the development specialists’ term for migration out of Kyrgyzstan — is the lack of employment opportunities at home (WFP 2021). Most of these migrants, predominantly male, seek work in Russia. The reasons for widespread flows to Russia stem from the shared Soviet history, the prevalence of the Russian language, widely spoken in Bishkek, and the visa-free entry. To better contextualise the current migratory dependency between these two countries, it is important to shed light on the history of long-standing nomadic traditions of the Kyrgyz people and the later shift towards collectivisation under Soviet rule. What followed was a strategic movement of families and labour power within the USSR from more densely populated areas to the “unpopulated” regions of Central Asia with the purpose of agricultural reform through the establishment of *kolkhozes*, or collective farms (Chari and Verdery 2009). With this shift to collectivisation, the conceptualisation of what ‘productivity’ meant within Soviet Kyrgyzstan also changed, presenting Kyrgyz women with both new rights and new expectations. The following historical context and literature review provide a framework for dissecting my fieldwork observations.

From pastoralism to Soviet settlements

When examining migration in Kyrgyzstan through a historical lens, the way of life for families to maintain constant motion and to persist through times of uncertainty becomes evident. The earliest Kyrgyz population, Turkic nomads, traditionally practised transhuman

pastoralism, herding sheep, goats, and horses, and relocating with seasonal shifts between yurt camps (Golden 2011). The challenges posed by these constant environmental changes led many such pastoralist societies to adapt innovatively to life’s uncertainties (Scoones 2023). However, with Tsarist Russia’s imperial conquests over the Central Asian region in the 19th century, these reflexive nomadic traditions became slowly endangered with the agricultural practices promoted by the Russian settlers (Thomas 2018). Under the later Soviet regime, Russian ethnographic fieldwork played a crucial role in the territorial delineation of Kyrgyzstan (Thomas 2018), which led to the formation of national territories and the establishment of the Kyrgyz Soviet Socialist Republic (Kyrgyz SSR) in 1936.

Through Soviet centralisation policies like *korenizatsiia*, which appointed non-Russian nationals in government roles (Thomas 2018), the Kyrgyz SSR, along with other Central Asian states and the Russian oblasts, was built to remain politically dependent on Moscow. This dependence on Russia is still evident today, with large Soviet-era energy structures and political statues prominent in Kyrgyz urban landscapes. However, the ethnic Russian population in Kyrgyzstan, once constituting as much as 30% in 1959 (Baimatov 2014), has significantly decreased to around 5% by 2022 (National Statistical Committee of the Kyrgyz Republic [NSC] 2023). The substantial presence of Russians during the Soviet era was driven by infrastructure projects and the labour demands for operating machinery. Russians have had a longstanding presence in Central Asia, historically enjoying a higher quality of life compared to the Central Asian populations in Russia (Baimatov 2014). The remittance dependency of Kyrgyzstan on the contemporary Russian Federation stems from the nation-building strategies of both Imperial Russia and the Soviet Union. The migratory movements of today are therefore influenced by centralised economic and political planning of an interdependent union built around Moscow.

Implications on gender

After the dissolution of the Soviet Union, the

ensuing rapid shifts towards privatised modes of labour prompted a rise in unemployment in Kyrgyzstan, turning the decision to migrate in search of better incomes into a necessary life strategy for many families (Abazov 1999). These migration patterns from Central Asia to Russia were partly prevalent during Soviet times, with certain industry specialists, such as apricot farmers, migrating to cities in Russia in the summer to sell their seasonal produce (Reeves, 2013b). However, the fall of the union meant that many new financial uncertainties, as well as gender divisions within the household, became more prominent. The following waves of male emigration to Russia in search of better job opportunities left a rift between husbands abroad and wives at home, especially during a time of inevitable reassessment of Kyrgyz national values and national identity after the Soviet era (Khitashvili 2016). During the Soviet Union, women's rights in Kyrgyzstan significantly developed as the ideal Soviet citizen did not hold gender as an obstacle to productive participation in the paid workforce. However, since motherhood was simultaneously taught to be a woman's socialist duty to the Soviet state, Kyrgyz women were now seen as tied to both the compounds of the workplace and home (Kamp 2016).

Societal changes after the fall of the Soviet Union have notably altered family dynamics in Kyrgyzstan. With a rising number of men now migrating for work, many women continue to take on dual roles, managing both household responsibilities and economic activities (Schmidt and Sagynbekova 2008). However, in comparison to other Central Asian states, Kyrgyzstan demonstrates a growing number of female migrants, with nearly 40% of Kyrgyz migrants in Russia being women in 2016 (FIDH 2016). Most migrating women take up positions in services, catering, textile production, and domestic work in private homes (FIDH 2016). The impact of female labour migration extends beyond immediate economic benefits; it has implications for wider shifts in social structures, education, and women's empowerment.

Scholars of migration have shown that women who migrate for work gain new skills, a sense of independence, and a broader perspective, which they often bring back to

their communities at home (King and Lulle 2016). However, this shift is not without its challenges. Female migrants frequently face job insecurities, exploitation, and difficulties in balancing work and family responsibilities, both at home and abroad. Based on my interviews, women's emigration has predominantly been depicted in a shameful light, making it harder for women to justify their reasons to migrate in search of personal benefits. In such a way, female migrants face a double vulnerability based on both their gendered and migrant identity abroad (FIDH 2016).

The relationship between gender norms and migration experiences in Central Asia has been extensively studied by scholars such as Madeleine Reeves (2009; 2013a; 2013b; 2019) and Igor Rubinov (2014). Throughout this paper, I adopt Reeves's (2009) critically pragmatic ethnographic approach, which moves beyond economic determinism to consider the nuanced social, cultural, and familial factors influencing migration decisions. This framework aligns with my interlocutors' narratives, revealing the complex motivations behind their choices. While male migration experiences remain underexplored in development policy (Reeves, 2013b), I analyse both male and female perspectives to offer a balanced understanding of how both sexes navigate migration uncertainties. Reeves's (2013a; 2013b) work on borders and identity provides historical and theoretical context to the challenges faced by Kyrgyz migrants amidst war and anti-immigration rhetoric.

Rubinov (2014) highlights that remittances are not solely economic but deeply embedded in familial obligations, reflecting tensions between traditional expectations and financial independence. This is echoed by my interlocutors' experiences. Additionally, insights from development organisation specialists frame my analysis through Ulrich Beck's (1992) "risk society" and Zygmunt Bauman's (2013) "liquid modernity," which illuminate the precarity and adaptability migrants face today. These perspectives are addressed in the final section, where I explore future migration implications and changing notions of modernity. Thus, my work compares existing literature on female agency with the stories of

my interlocutors, Aiyimgul, Zhyldyz, and Bermet, emphasising their voices and how they add to this scholarship.

they would have to wait. It was lunchtime, and I found myself wondering about all the intricate reasons for people of all ages to come here on a weekday to sit bunched up together patiently for who knows how long. I hoped we would not have to wait until dinner time.

I was also here waiting for my meeting with Arslan, the Head of the Center for Employment of Citizens Abroad, who had kindly agreed to meet with me for an interview. After waiting for around 40 minutes, I was finally let into the office to talk with him. "Our primary purpose here is to enable our citizens to work abroad safely and to inform them of their rights, following the guidelines set forth by the Ministry of Labour, Social Security, and Migration of the Kyrgyz Republic," Arslan explained to me in a formal manner.

We're currently following government guidelines aimed at stabilising migration. While we continue to assist citizens in relocating abroad for work, we are also exploring new strategies to attract them back to their homeland (на родину). We promote information about sectors in our country needing more manpower. However, many people still prefer to leave, often to the US or Europe, instead of Russia. Recently, there's been a surge in interest for seasonal work on strawberry fields in the UK, likely due to higher pay and work stability. Our citizens in Russia often express safety concerns, which is less common among those in Europe.

After discussing at length the countries where Kyrgyz labour migrants are currently settling, I asked Arslan about his views on return migration. "Why do some people decide to return?" I asked. "Well, there aren't many who do, but those who return bring in new ideas and innovation, which is what we really need here," he said, taking out his phone, "Let me show you. This is my friend Almaz. He returned to his hometown last year and started a strawberry farm using tips he learned from English farmers — the right soil types, irrigation systems, and so on. And he's doing very well now!" Arslan showed me a few pictures on his Instagram profile of Almaz working on his land.



Figure 1: Monday, 21st of August, 1pm Center for Employment of Citizens Abroad. Bishkek, Kyrgyzstan. Author's drawing.

Departure

The above is a doodle I made in my fieldwork notebook during my visit to the Center for Employment of Citizens Abroad. The atmosphere was busy but surprisingly mundane: a dimly lit lobby filled with young couples, older women, and many young men, all seated on old leather couches, waiting for their appointments. Some older women appeared visibly annoyed by the long wait, while most young men were sat mindlessly scrolling their smartphones, looking as if they knew from experience exactly how much longer

"This kind of motivation is what Kyrgyzstan needs. Unfortunately, while many dream of developing our nation, once they find work opportunities abroad, they often choose not to return. And I can understand why."

This excerpt from my hour-long interview with Arslan illustrates the complex migration patterns and ambitions of many Kyrgyz labour migrants. Arslan's words reflected the local imaginaries of a life beyond Bishkek: stable, better paid, and "modern." These imaginaries did not surprise me since I had repeatedly stumbled upon them in conversations with taxi drivers, beauty salon workers, and during long dinner conversations with my friend and her family. One salon worker, with no immediate plans to leave, still aspired to move out of Kyrgyzstan some day, "Of course I would, that's the dream. The economy is going down here. Many of my friends have already left," she answered when I asked whether she would ever like to live abroad.

What surprised me was the persistence of this narrative of stability offered by emigration, considering the recent destabilisation of migrant workers' lives in Russia. Despite the rising threats of police brutality, forced deportations and many other dangers that Central Asian migrant workers now face in Russia (Institute for War and Peace Reporting [IWPR] 2023), migration from Kyrgyzstan seemed to be widely viewed as the logical next step towards enhancing one's quality of life. Yet, this shared sentiment seemed to be at odds with the new government policies mentioned by Arslan, which aim to stabilise migration processes. As Bermet from the International Organization for Migration (IOM) later explained to me, this policy is designed to discourage emigration and instead encourage people to "choose Kyrgyzstan first." The dichotomy between the government's efforts to contain migratory movement at a time of uncertainty and the ruling desire of many individuals to continue emigrating highlighted a complex paradox at the heart of contemporary Kyrgyz society.

The prevailing economic uncertainties were often used by my interlocutors as a springboard into discussing other types of uncertainties of everyday lives in Kyrgyzstan. "We have

corruption here at a genetic level," a taxi driver told me, "And it's expensive to live in Bishkek, people spend so much money here on unnecessary things. I spent so much less when living in *Kazan* [Russia]. I liked that I didn't have to think about buying gifts for every single occasion when a relative had a baby back home. I could just focus on myself and not have to attend all these *tois* [traditional Kyrgyz festivities] by being in Russia."

This comment on *tois* reminded me of the previous conversation I had with Azamat, the waiter who had worked in Russia, who expressed similar feelings of relief from family obligations in the form of social spending. As discussed by Rubinov (2014, 189) in his ethnography on Kyrgyz social reciprocity and obligations of remitting, gift-giving at Kyrgyz *tois* represents "the continuity of social proximity across households," even at times when the gift-giver is absent. Similar to Malinowski's (1922) study on the *kula ring* of Papua New Guinea, as well as other forms of obligatory reciprocity, *tois* provide a structured environment for giving and receiving gifts and exchanging information on family achievements. They also serve to demonstrate the continuity of wealth within families and their broader kinship networks (Rubinov 2014). The rise in remittances sent back to Kyrgyzstan has enabled this show of wealth to expand, giving rise to a habit of "keeping up with the others" for many households (Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe [OSCE] 2009, 53). What Azamat and the taxi driver were emphasising was the excessiveness of this show of wealth that *tois* had become. "So many couples take out loans nowadays to pay for their weddings. There are loan companies specifically designed for this. I know an ironic case where a couple got divorced shortly after their wedding because of the cycle of debt they ended up in after hosting their *toi*. I don't think I want to have a big wedding."

Based on these observations, leaving Kyrgyzstan to work abroad offered many young men a way to avoid a myriad of social obligations back home. Azamat's comment on not wanting to host a big wedding because of the high costs highlighted a shifting attitude shared by many younger Kyrgyz generations

against traditional wedding customs, with a growing shift towards financial independence. Similar notions were expressed by women: Zhyldyz, who had divorced her husband before moving to Moscow, echoed Azamat's words saying she too would not want to have a costly wedding ceremony. However, for some women, the opportunity to escape social obligations through migration is not simply a choice but rather a survival mechanism. "It's almost expected for a man to leave the kids and wife home to work abroad and send remittances for the whole community," Bermet explained:

This is especially the case in rural villages. However, there are many stereotypes attached to women who migrate away from their hometowns. Their occupations abroad are constantly questioned and discussed by families and friends, and there is a lot of jealousy involved too. I've also found that often the reason women leave the country to work in Russia has to do with falling out with their husbands or mothers-in-law. So, it's not always a genuine desire to leave, but more of a push coming from inside their own communities.

My earlier conversation with Zhyldyz at the restaurant offers a good example of this push factor. Her divorce, primarily due to the challenges she faced as a *kelin* (a newlywed bride) living under the roof of her mother-in-law, led her to think that moving to Moscow was the only sensible option left. She felt compelled to leave and start anew, and she described her decision to depart by bus with around 500 Rubles in savings as "the only viable one at that moment." In this way, migration emerges not only as a way to escape social expectations but as a response to familial pressures and gendered dynamics that constrain women's agency.

Despite expectations for many *kelin* to conform to their husband's family's will, Bermet's comment and Zhyldyz's personal experience highlighted an unexpected form of agency: women using migration to reject familial expectations and escape societal pressures. The anthropologist Lila Abu-Lughod (2000) explored how Bedouin women in North Africa, constrained by patriarchal structures,

use poetry as a subtle rebellion against these social hierarchies. Through poetry, they express grievances and challenge norms without directly confronting authority, thus exercising impactful agency. While Kyrgyz women may not use poetry, migration becomes their rebellion — a conscious choice to step outside restrictive familial roles. Zhyldyz's decision to migrate to Moscow after her divorce reflects this agency. Unable to endure her role as a *kelin* under her mother-in-law's scrutiny, migration offered Zhyldyz a chance to escape oppressive dynamics and reclaim independence. This mirrors Abu-Lughod's (2000) argument: agency does not always take the form of explicit resistance but emerges through everyday actions that disrupt expectations. The pressures on *kelins* to manage the household, defer to elders, and uphold reputations leave little room for individuality (Childress 2017; Isabaeva 2014). As Thieme (2008) notes, the absence of husbands due to labour migration exacerbates these dynamics and leaves *kelins* vulnerable to exploitation. In this context, migration becomes an act of defiance, as women like Zhyldyz break free from narrow gender roles. It is not just a survival strategy but a means of reclaiming agency and escaping familial pressures, much like Bedouin poetry. By drawing on Abu-Lughod's (2000) insights, we see Kyrgyz women's migration challenges narratives of passivity, showing how women in constrained environments find ways to exercise agency — whether through poetry or movement across borders.

These discussions highlight the gendered nuances of decision-making before departure and underscore a generational and socioeconomic shift in aspirations. This evolving mindset is reflected in Aliya Shagieva's painting "Dreams of Paris" (Figure 2), which I saw at her exhibition at the Kyrgyz National Museum of Fine Arts. The painting depicts an elderly woman confined by traditional domestic roles, metaphorically representing societal expectations that many young Kyrgyz, such as Zhyldyz and Azamat, are challenging. As Billur Gungoren (2004) notes, younger generations in Kyrgyzstan are increasingly adopting Western values centred around personal fulfilment and individualisation. This generational divide became even more apparent during a

conversation about wedding traditions with my friend's grandmother. She nostalgically recalled her own big wedding and that of her daughter, to which my friend responded that her mother did not know many of her wedding guests. This moment highlighted the growing questioning and rejection of long-held traditions by Kyrgyzstan's younger generation. The "Dreams of Paris" painting subtly questions the unspoken aspirations of women, particularly in the context of migration and marriage. It symbolises a broader transformation within Kyrgyz society, where migration is increasingly seen not merely as a quest for economic betterment but as a pursuit of personal independence and a modern identity. This shift marks a departure from the established norms and expectations of older generations. As Kyrgyzstan continues to navigate these changing tides, the stories of individuals like Zhyldyz, Azamat, and my friend's grandmother offer a vivid portrayal of a society in flux, wrestling with the complexities of tradition, modernity, and evolving interpretations of what it means to leave one's home.

Transit

Much like the critical departure stage of migration, the actual migrant experience of working and living in a host country comes with a set of its own unique challenges. These range from navigating unforeseen bureaucratic barriers and life circumstances to finding a sense of community, keeping in contact with the communities and family at home and establishing oneself as an individual beyond the identity tied to a specific geographical region or gender role (Verkuyten et al. 2019). In the case of Kyrgyz labour migrants in Russia, the added challenge of facing structural racism against Central Asians presents concrete obstacles for societal integration. Therefore, the primary motivation of labour migrants to gain Russian citizenship is often ensuring the continuity and stability of their legal work status instead of fully immersing themselves in Russian society (Poletaev 2020).

Marsel, a 42-year-old chef working at and managing the restaurant I visited during my stay, told me his turbulent story of seeking such stability in Russia. Marsel migrated to Moscow

when he was 23 years old. He holds a degree in finance from back home, but he realised early on that working in Russia would enable him to make twice the money he was making as a worker at an oil company in Kyrgyzstan. "The only thought in my mind at that time was to make money and to move back home one day. I had a wife and baby back in Kyrgyzstan, and I had to provide for them," he told me. In Moscow, Marsel worked as a goods seller at the Cherkizovsky Market, the biggest marketplace in Europe at the time. "I worked there with other Kyrgyz folks, Uzbeks, and Tajiks. The winters were long and cold, so I thought to myself I better save my fingers from freezing. It took me a while but eventually I found another job through a leaflet, as a furniture assembler. Since I didn't hold a Russian passport, securing jobs was hard."

Marsel often changed jobs and flats during his stay in Russia. Without Russian citizenship, many of his jobs were illegal and paid in cash. His first flat, meant for three people, was shared with 15–20 other Kyrgyz workers. Azamat, another restaurant worker, also lived in an overcrowded flat designed for four people. Madeleine Reeves describes such living arrangements, common among Central Asians in Russia, as a "public secret" — widely known but unacknowledged by state surveys and invisible in national statistics (Reeves 2013b). These secret spaces of illegality translate into prolonged precariousness and marginalisation for many Central Asian migrants. This situation parallels undocumented Mexican migrants in the US or *sans papiers* in France, where othering facilitates exploitation (Fassin 2001). Marsel explained that he gathered information about jobs and labour rights through word-of-mouth from fellow Central Asians, often during metro rides or in public spaces. As a migrant in Russia, Marsel lived as an economically contributing public secret — constantly concealing his non-Russian citizenship, shifting from job to job, and remitting his earnings to his family back home.

Zhyldyz shared similar precarities she faced when finding jobs and trying to find a sense of belonging in Russia. She told me she had very limited money once she first arrived in Moscow, and she struggled to make ends meet. After



Figure 2: Aliya Shagieva, "Dreams of Paris," canvas 40x50 cm, oil paints. 2023. Photograph by author.

finding work at a clothing store, she realised that she was spending too much money on public transport. She soon started working simultaneously at a beauty salon next to her flat. Though she found the work environment and pay at the salon better, with the start of the COVID-19 pandemic, the salon had to shut down. Fortunately, around the same time, Zhyldyz found out about a Central Asian restaurant opening in the same centre. After an interview with the Kyrgyz woman who ran the place, she got a job as an accountant. "I was shocked, I had no experience in running numbers!" Zhyldyz told me with excitement, "It was a dream job. I learned to use the system and made around 100,000 Rubles a month, and that money was a huge motivator. But the work was tough, and there were times where I worked around the clock and couldn't see my children much. I was also working simultaneously at the salon after the pandemic ended."

Aiyimgul, a 56-year-old female return migrant with whom I had a phone call one late evening in Bishkek, shared with me her story of searching for jobs in the UK, where she lived and worked alone for six years. "I have a medical degree from Bishkek University, but the highest position I could work in the UK was as an elderly care worker, and even that took me a while to reach," she shared with me:

It was difficult trying to find jobs in the UK without knowing English. I worked as a chambermaid for the first year, trying to make ends meet and send remittances to my husband and two daughters at home. Then I got a job as a chef, and later I worked in elderly care. I was surprised at how often people asked about my previous experience in these roles. 'I was a mom,' I always answered them, 'of course, I had plenty of experience.'

She told me this, smiling. We talked more about what it was like being a mother and working abroad. "I left when my daughters were just hitting puberty. I started sending my daughters new shirts, underwear, and bras by mail; they were embarrassed to ask their dad to buy them. It was very hard being a distant mom and

wife," Aiyimgul continued. "Many people gossiped about what I was doing in the UK. I think it was mostly jealousy. Our house was the first one in our neighborhood to get a washing machine, which I sent my husband the money for. All our neighbors apparently came over to see how it worked out of curiosity," she shared with me, laughing.

Contrasted with the more prevalent setting of men working abroad away from their children, Aiyimgul's perspective, although in a different regional context to my other interlocutors, sheds light on the nuanced challenges and gendered expectations that many female labour migrants must navigate when living alone in a foreign country. While Aiyimgul had full working rights in the UK, she too said she often felt like an intruder, someone other than the rest. This was also a reason for her return to Kyrgyzstan, in addition to rejoining her family. She told me she did not see herself as anything else than a "migrant" when she was working abroad. Aiyimgul's and Zhyldyz's stories also depicted an instance which diverged from typical understandings and perceptions of women in migration, historically and in many present cases in Kyrgyzstan, as a "secondary migrant," migrating with the sole purpose of creating or reuniting family (Pedraza 1991, 306). For Aiyimgul, going against the preconceived ideas of women as migrants and wives, and instead taking on the role of the breadwinner resulted in a struggle to juggle the roles and expectations of being breadwinner, mother, wife, and daughter-in-law — a struggle shared by many middle-aged migrating Kyrgyz women (Thieme 2008). Her agency back home in regulating the use of the money she remitted to her husband, which was meant to be used for building a new house, was at times disregarded as the remittances were spent to buy additional items that she was sometimes unaware of despite being the main financial contributor of the household. The devaluation of her educational qualifications from back home further stripped down her agency and her feeling of "professional prestige," resulting in a contradictory case of socioeconomic mobility in the context of migration (Cruz 2012, 534). However, Aiyimgul's optimism and emphasis on her achievements despite the hardships she faced living alone in a

foreign country shed light on how migration is not purely a “vulnerability trope” set on women in migration but can be a source of considerable “material and personal empowerment” for older women (King and Lulle, 2016).

The experiences of Kyrgyz citizens in Russia, characterised by prolonged periods of life uncertainties stemming from brief moments of content upon securing stable employment and their quick disappearance shortly after, exemplify the implications of living in a “risk society.” This concept, developed by sociologists Ulrich (1992) and Anthony Giddens (1998), is vividly illustrated by these modern fluctuating fortunes. As defined by Giddens (1992, 3), a risk society is “a society increasingly preoccupied with the future (and also with safety), which generates the notion of risk.” Economic dependency of Kyrgyzstan on Russia, for example, is a result of previous governmental and ideological decisions, which are now posing new risks, such as enabling a source of stable income for the resulting migrant population in Russia. Although living in a “risk society” might not be on the minds of Kyrgyz people going about their everyday lives, the accumulation of knowledge about potential outcomes for events such as the perks of gaining Russian citizenship or the dangers of ending up on the blacklist is exactly the type of anxious “reflexivity” which thinkers like Zygmunt Bauman (2013) point to when conceptualising our increasingly interconnected and informed world. As stated by Beck (1992, 21), “the concept of risk is directly bound to the concept of reflexive modernization.”

“Many younger generations prefer not to seek higher education anymore,” Bermet told me. “They would rather move abroad and make a much better living working in these unstable jobs. We’ve seen many instances where young people become content living this way, hopping from one contract to another with no health or pension plans in sight. This poses some serious questions for educational development in Kyrgyzstan.” This insight made by Bermet offers a good example of how international development organisations grapple with emerging risks through reflexivity. The precarious nature of work that many younger

generations are increasingly tied to is not unique to Central Asians in Russia. The shift of young people to work in “flexible” work settings with the cost of future stability is becoming a prominent phenomenon in the increasingly digitalised global economy (International Labour Organization [ILO] 2022). For example, in Japan, the rise of young irregular workers has led to new forms of insecurity, such as the phenomenon of “net café refugees”—a modern manifestation of homelessness (Allison 2012). Yet, for Kyrgyz labour migrants in Russia, these challenges are compounded by the additional uncertainties of being undocumented workers in a country at war, making the future of work and family life even more unpredictable. In the following section, I delve into the decisions of Kyrgyz migrants to return and how they envision stable futures amidst the instability of the risk society they are currently grappling with.

Return

Having examined the reasons for initial migration and the experiences of labour migrants in Russia, I now turn to the final stage — returning home. Recently, many male workers in Russia have returned to Kyrgyzstan due to the threat of military mobilisation into the Russian Army. This safety threat, combined with the pressure from Kyrgyz families for young men to migrate for work, raises several questions. Arslan’s vision of returning citizens bringing innovative ideas for economic development now seems uncertain. Would these returning male labour migrants settle in Kyrgyzstan? Will they have the financial capacity and creativity to do so, considering the limited work opportunities at home? Or will they seek new destinations, and if so, which countries will offer the same appeal that Russia once did?

These are some of the questions I asked my interlocutors while in Bishkek, as well as online. Through Facebook, I received interesting debates over reasons to return. Darhan, a middle-aged woman living in Kazakhstan, commented, “In my opinion, as people age, they all return to their homeland, to their native roots, even former presidents! Those who have millions! They ask to return home. With the new president, Kyrgyzstan is now changing for the

better. We hope that the youth will return with new knowledge and new ideas and will further elevate Kyrgyzstan in a positive direction!" Aijan, a young mother living in Moscow, replied simply, "I return every time only because of my parents. And I leave every time only because of the non-existent salary." Samat, a middle-aged male migrant living in Europe, replied:

In the Kyrgyz Republic, unemployment is, I assume, the main reason why people leave the country and do not return. The standard of living and safety also play a significant role. Being in Europe right now, I've become used to the local driving culture and road safety. However, there is one huge advantage to one's homeland. It's the inexplicable

feeling of home that only comes with age.

Considering that Samat's comment received the most likes and was brought to the top of the comments section, a desire to return home seemed to be a commonly shared sentiment, especially among older migrants abroad. Promoting this feeling of home was also the current strategy which development organisations and the Kyrgyz government aimed to implement. "The real reasons people choose to migrate are hard to track these days. It's becoming more about people mimicking each other than having a real need to leave. I think the process of return migration should work similarly to the process of leaving – returned family members should encourage migrants to return," Bermet told me when further explaining the policy of stabilising migration processes.

Indeed, many returned migrants I talked to were happy with their decisions to return. These were mostly the female return migrants, who expressed feelings of community and stability once back home. However, many of my male interlocutors expressed how hard it was to find proper work back home after not having pursued a higher education. "I'm working here at Dordoi Bazaar. I work from 5 am to 9 pm. I'm also working as a taxi driver. It's expensive to live in Bishkek. On a basic income like mine, affording to survive is hard work," a taxi driver who recently returned from Russia to avoid the mobilisation told me. Another taxi driver told me that many of his friends decided to stay in Russia despite the dangers of military conscriptions they faced there. "They all live in hopes of the situation changing, with hopes of Putin suddenly making peace with Ukraine and with the economy turning back to what it was. But I think this will go on for long, Putin has nothing else to do, and he is making money. This all has to do with money, and everything runs on money," he stated bleakly.

While many Central Asian men are now returning home to avoid conscription, growing numbers of Russian male citizens are simultaneously resettling in countries like Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan for this very same reason. However, as Kyrgyz return migrants are



Figure 3: Exchange rates at a currency exchange office in Bishkek, 23rd of Aug, 11 am. The value of the Russian Ruble has fallen to equal that of the Kyrgyz som. Author's photography

returning with very limited to non-existent savings and plans for the future, Russian emigres or *relokanty* often hold some savings and some form of plan for relocation to a third point of entry through personal ties (Institute for International Political Studies [ISPI], 2023). The stark contrast and inequalities between Russians safely fleeing their homes and Central Asians precariously returning to theirs echoed in the taxi driver's observation on everything running on money. Even through my conversations with people in higher socioeconomic positions, I noticed how they were voicing their concerns over how returning to Kyrgyzstan was something they all wished to strive for one day, but only once the economy was better and more prosperous. Bermet went on to tell me:

This is the dilemma we now face. People with high degrees of education leave and dream of one day returning to a more developed Kyrgyzstan. But no one is coming back to develop the country. And now the government is planning to bring in migrant workers from Pakistan to work in the agricultural sector, since our citizens don't want to do these low-paying but extremely vital jobs.

The contradicting flows of migration to and from Russia, and the institutional long-term dilemmas and risks, which Bermet emphasised were not necessarily prevalent in the minds of return migrants themselves. Rather, the "risks" such as economic depression, job precarity, and unemployment, which the Kyrgyz government and development bodies were discussing, translated in the minds of return migrants into feelings of uncertainty over one's future as a provider, a wife or a daughter.

It was challenging to reintegrate into society back home after having lived in such a different one for so long. I still face difficulties relating to my now grown-up daughters and even my husband. My daughters now tell me that they wouldn't want their children to live far from them, which is hard for me to hear. I don't regret my decision of having worked abroad though.

Aiyimgul told me when I asked her how she felt returning to Kyrgyzstan after having worked in the UK for six years. "I knew I wanted to spend my retirement days in Kyrgyzstan though. Seeing how elderly people were treated in England was painful. I could never imagine being old and sick and not living under the same roof as my own family," she told me. After her return, Aiyimgul successfully started her own non-governmental organisation that translates international health policy recommendations from English to Russian and Kyrgyz for local citizens. "I've become more open as a person, and I always knew I wanted to come back home and share my new insights." Comparatively, Marsel told me that once he returned to Kyrgyzstan after being caught with no working license in Russia, he established his own restaurant chain in Bishkek with contacts he had gained in Moscow. He said that he wished to open a similar restaurant somewhere in Europe and to spread his love for Central Asian cuisine. These instances reminded me of the story of Almaz, who had started his own strawberry farm after returning, shared by Arslan at our initial meeting.

At a time of heightened anxieties — marked by war, inequalities faced in Russia, and the rise of return migration — Zygmunt Bauman's (2013) concept of liquid modernity provides a valuable lens through which to understand the adaptability of Kyrgyz migrants. Bauman (2013) asserts that modern life demands individual flexibility and constant adaptation in response to its inherent unpredictability. This fluidity is evident in the experiences of my interlocutors, who navigate precarious work settings, changing migration policies, and the loss of safety networks abroad, often at the cost of personal stability. For many of my interlocutors, migration serves not only as a survival strategy but also as a form of "knowledge acquisition" (Williams and Baláž 2008, 1928), equipping them with new viewpoints and financial independence that enhance their resilience to future uncertainties. Returnees described feeling more 'open' and ready to migrate again if opportunities arose, reflecting the flexible thinking Bauman (2013) identifies as central to modern life. For younger generations, migration also fosters a shift toward individualism: rather than conforming to

socially motivated spending habits or traditional obligations like *tois*, they prioritise personal purchases and build social networks with other migrant workers abroad.

This adaptive reflexivity is particularly apparent in the creative strategies migrants employ to manage instability. For example, taxi drivers returning to Kyrgyzstan juggled multiple income sources after being barred from Russia, demonstrating their ability to respond quickly to shifting circumstances. Similarly, Azamat and Marsel embody Bauman's (2013) notion of fluid identities: both used their experiences abroad to reimagine and pursue new aspirations at home, despite facing barriers of otherness in Russia. Women like Aiyimgul and Zhyldyz, meanwhile, chose to return to their communities, confronting the challenges of reintegration and gendered social stigmas with a sense of agency and purpose. In these stories of return, Kyrgyz migrants exemplify the adaptability and resilience that Bauman's (2013) liquid modernity demands in times of uncertainty. Their ability to remain flexible — to pivot between aspirations abroad and opportunities at home — highlights the fluidity of identities and livelihoods in an increasingly interconnected and unpredictable world.

Conclusion

The military conscriptions targeting Central Asians following the war in Ukraine and the consequences of living as a public secret pose critical threats for many Kyrgyz labour migrants currently residing in Russia. The rooted strategies of depending on remittance flows from migrants working abroad present dilemmas over the future of work and financial stability for communities back home. These challenges include not only immediate and long-term economic impacts but also the disruption of deep-rooted family expectations for older sons to provide and for daughters to stay home. This may be leading to potential identity reconfigurations and feelings of uselessness, especially among Kyrgyz male workers.

This paper has brought a focus to how these dilemmas are currently being faced by both the Kyrgyz labour market and the people dependent on migrating at a time of shifting generational notions of social reciprocity. Ways

in which people in Bishkek decide to leave their homes for work abroad are influenced by a myriad of weighted uncertainties and possibilities — uncertainty of employment over the expense of education back home, possibilities of gaining independence away from family versus conforming to societal and gendered expectations to remain, the risk of returning home and losing that sense of independence or to return with a sense of a newly found identity. The dichotomies between individuality versus community-oriented activities were constantly weighted against each other by my interlocutors of all ages and genders. The experience of Aiyimgul showed a way of combining both, as she started her own business at home despite the challenges of reintegration. Her story also highlights how, despite the stigmas attached to female labour migration, her decision to return was fuelled by her own sense of what a meaningful future and retirement would look like for her. However, for an increasing number of people, this dichotomy is not a choice to be juggled but an immediate reality in which the only option is one or the other. This is now the case for Azamat, who, until recently, was determined to keep working his way up in Moscow but now must face the precarious consequences of returning home with no safety over future income.

This paper points to the many gendered implications which migration presents. Zhyldyz and her story of having “no other option” than to leave the country after divorcing her husband highlights the stigma of deviating from traditional gender norms. Migration, in this sense, is still a predominantly gendered phenomenon in Kyrgyzstan, despite what official data might tell. The economic downturn in Russia has had a profound effect on Kyrgyz female migrants, as many of them now find themselves without viable options to continue their employment abroad. This situation puts them at risk of returning to potentially abusive environments back home. These barriers to Russian labour migration further present questions over the future of children and bring attention to how Kyrgyz male migration has come to influence father-son and father-daughter relationships at home. This question could be incorporated into further study to better understand the implications for the

increasing patterns of return migration in Kyrgyzstan, as children living in the absence of father and mother figures is a phenomenon reported in many parts of the country (Muhametjanova and Adanır, 2022).

The Kyrgyzstan government's strategy of stabilising migration aims to alter prevailing perceptions in Kyrgyzstan about migration. While curbing emigration is a logical form of risk mitigation during economic instability, migration will remain appealing for families and individuals who see no future in Kyrgyzstan due to economic or value-based reasons, or both. I argue instead for NGOs and policymakers to adopt a multifocal approach, as demonstrated in this paper, which examines migration stages with a focus on gendered perceptions of the precarious nature of work and life abroad. By exploring intersections of gender roles, historical narratives, and perceptions of modernity, a more nuanced picture of what it means to leave or remain can be uncovered. These elements are also tied to historical notions of how work is orchestrated and controlled at the state level. This study contributes to broader discussions of remittance dependency, de-Russification in the post-Soviet region, and changing gender identities in Kyrgyzstan. The current life-threatening realities of living and working in Russia are moulding the paths of many Kyrgyz labour migrants toward unambiguity. This work illustrates how people and institutions in Kyrgyzstan are gradually making sense of and imagining their futures amid these uncertain times of movement.

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