

# RETURNING "HOME"

WHY SOCIAL SCIENTISTS SHOULD  
PAY MORE ATTENTION TO ETHNIC  
RETURN MIGRATION

BY COLLEEN WOOD

Song K l lake, Naryn Province, Kyrgyzstan.  
Photo by Thomas Depenbusch via Flickr.

*Opposite page: View across Lake Chakmaktin  
toward Ak-Tash, Little Pamir.*

In October 2017, a sturdy striped UAZ bus with six families on board reached Naryn City, a modest regional capital in central Kyrgyzstan, after several days of travel from northeastern Afghanistan. The bus's engine buzzed as its passengers—six families, 33 people in total—descended to meet the Kyrgyz officials who waited to welcome the guests with candy and music. The families, stepping foot in Kyrgyzstan for the first time, had left their community of several thousand ethnic Kyrgyz high in Afghanistan's Pamir mountains, a century-old community that's dwindling due to harsh living conditions and extreme isolation.

Kyrgyzstan's government had invited these families to return to

their ancestral homeland for education and medical care, but the terms of support and the length of stay remained unclear. In July 2018, after a long winter cooped up in Naryn, about half of the group packed their bags and began the long journey back to Afghanistan. Journalists who met with the departing Pamiris at a rest stop, four hours in to a three-day journey, recounted the group's frustration with the lack of employment opportunities and the impossibility of keeping up on rent after housing subsidies ran dry. "Cold, sad, boring," one headline announced, trying to piece together the flop of this particular resettlement effort. Government officials dug in their heels, asserting that they

had only extended the invitation for humanitarian support and educational opportunities, backtracking from previous promises to provide full support.

The Pamiri Kyrgyz who stayed, determined to make Naryn home, had nurtured hopes of receiving *kairylman* (returnee) status, as part of a larger national initiative established in 2006 to fast-track the citizenship process for ethnic Kyrgyz expatriates. In May 2019, a news story broke about Pamiri men who worked in the Naryn City bazaar collecting cardboard boxes for a few dollars a day. They needed the money to feed their families, but also to pay for the five-hour trip to Kyrgyzstan's capital, Bishkek, in order to complete the paperwork



needed for *kairylman* status. At a roundtable in Bishkek later that month, several parliamentarians criticized the ministry responsible for these returnees, saying that the big show of bringing these families from Afghanistan was nothing more than a PR stunt. High-level bureaucrats struggled to clarify their language to circumvent the tangle of local and international politics of this initiative. At the same roundtable, a representative from Kyrgyzstan's Ministry of Foreign Affairs stated that citizenship for Afghani Kyrgyz was impossible because it would lead to Afghanistan's government refusing to allow ethnic Kyrgyz to even visit their ancestral homeland, although he did not explain why that might be.

The two-year saga of this group's return to an estranged homeland provides a lens for

studying the challenges associated with the broader phenomenon of government-sponsored ethnic return migration, an understudied migratory pattern in which the descendants of migrants who permanently settled abroad "return" to their ancestral homeland at the urging of the ancestral state. In Kyrgyzstan's case, mismatched expectations about the purpose and duration of the Pamiri Kyrgyz community's resettlement, as well as the terms of economic support, demonstrate how insufficient bureaucratic capacity and limited resources can constrain a government from reaping the intended political and cultural benefits of engaging its diaspora.

Approximately 60,000 people have migrated to Kyrgyzstan through its *kairylman* program, but Kyrgyzstan is not

the only country to facilitate ethnic return migration by sweetening the pot with fast-tracked citizenship acquisition, land allotments, and welfare support. Examples of countries engaging their diasporas in this way can be found around the world: Israel supports the right of Jews to make *aliyah* and get Israeli citizenship; Germany sponsored the return of ethnic Germans from Eastern Europe after World War II and the collapse of the Soviet Union; South Korea welcomes people with Korean ancestry, largely from China and the United States, to work and receive social benefits. In the post-Soviet region, Kazakhstan has actively encouraged its diaspora members to return to their ancestral homeland since declaring its independence in 1991, when ethnic Kazakhs made up less than half of the country's population. Since then, more than one million ethnic Kazakhs, a quarter of the total diaspora, have resettled in Kazakhstan. Kazakhstan's government revamped its *Oralman* (Returnee) program in the wake of Russia's annexation of Crimea in 2014. Russia's own compatriots movement—a repatriation scheme targeting ethnic Russians and Russian speakers, formally institutionalized in 2006—has facilitated the resettlement of about 800,000 people.

At least 15 other countries have policies aimed at attracting ethnic return migration, but an exhaustive list does not exist because the topic is still so new to social scientists. Preliminary research has been framed primarily from a bird's-eye, geopolitical perspective, rather than from the perspective of the returnees and the governments who invited them back.



Existing theories focus on the reasons why states might encourage ethnic return migration. Some states, such as Kazakhstan, use return migration in order to overcome demographic challenges—encouraging migrants to move to sluggish industrial areas or sparsely populated border territories, for instance. Ethnic return migration can have economic advantages as well; South Korea has promoted the return of ethnic Koreans from the United States as a way to capture human capital. Finally, countries can frame repatriation programs in such a way as to promote a particular political and cultural identity.

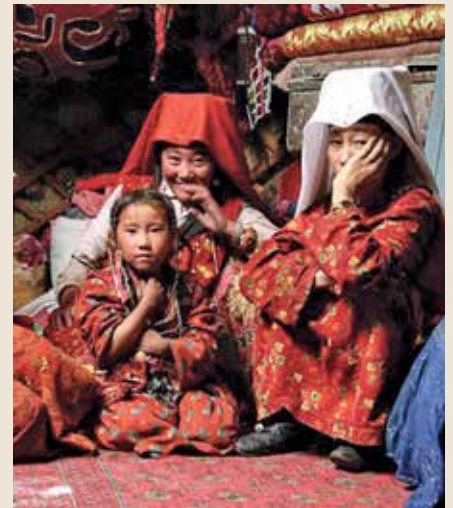
## Ethnic return migration is one way to achieve a congruence of nation and territory

Ethnic return migration is one way to achieve a congruence of nation and territory, sending a message to neighboring states that a government sees itself as responsible for its co-ethnics. This can explain why Hungary's government jumped at the chance to resettle ethnic Hungarians from Venezuela in early 2019, and promotes minority language rights in other Central European countries, while simultaneously pursuing draconian deportations of non-Hungarian migrants.

When applying these theories to the Kyrgyz case, the decision to sponsor the resettlement of these 33 people—and the *kairylman* program, more broadly—seems to follow the identity-based logic rather than the materially driven one. While Kyrgyzstan receives millions of dollars in development support from Western countries, sending humanitarian support to co-ethnics in Afghanistan could have been seen as a way to build legitimacy at home; resettling members from an impoverished community in a war-torn country could signal generosity and relative wealth to Kyrgyzstan's domestic population. But, because the government did not have the capacity to support the Pamiris and integrate them into Kyrgyz society, it is likely that the two-year saga of the Pamiri Kyrgyz did not achieve its intended effects.

The existing theories help us understand why the Kyrgyz state may have encouraged the Pamiris to come, but there is no scholarship about what happens on the ground. My research attempts to disentangle the relevant local actors and interests driving the *kairylman* program and to understand the experiences of the returnees. Lack of funding, inaccurate statistics, or miscommunication between the national and regional governments might all have caused hiccups in welfare distribution and driven confusion, for example; but we won't be able to understand divergent outcomes in ethnic return migration programs as long as social scientists try to explain this phenomenon through a detached geopolitical perspective.

We also don't know much about the decision-making process and



*Top:* Kyrgyz men of the Afghan Pamirs, circa 1912. Photo courtesy of Internet Archive Book Images.

*Bottom:* Afghan Kyrgyz living in the Wakhan Corridor. Photo by seair21 via Flickr.

*Opposite page:* Pamir Mountains. Photo by Colleen Wood.

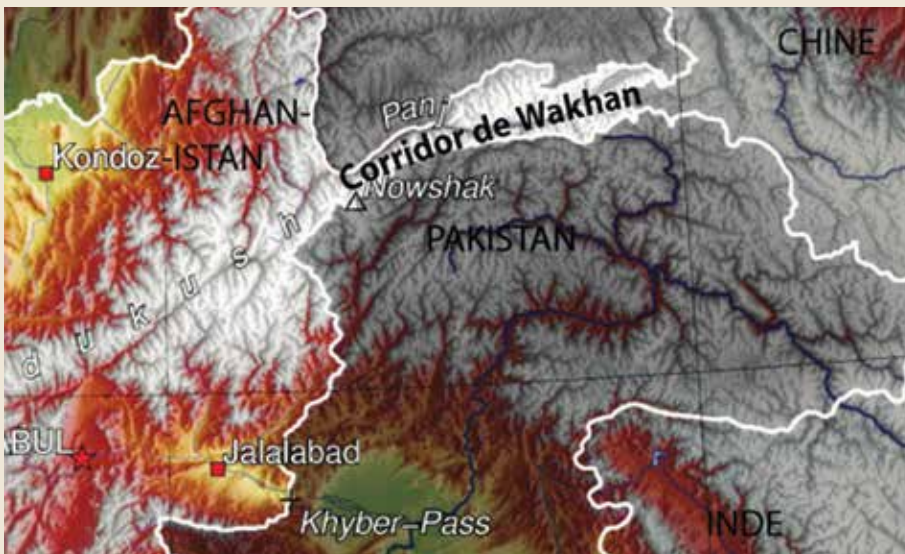
## The popularity of ethnic return programs illustrates the allure of myths about homeland

experiences of those who pack up and move to their ancestral homeland, and even less about the reactions of those who have lived for decades in places where returnees settle. Albert Hirschman's famous book *Exit, Voice, and Loyalty* has been picked up by political scientists like David Laitin to explain migration patterns, but more research is necessary to understand the dynamics of ethnic return migration programs in particular. It is unclear which factors are relevant for navigating insider-outsider boundaries between those who have ethnic and

linguistic features in common but do not share a civic identity, for instance.

The "return" of six Kyrgyz families from Afghanistan constitutes just a small fraction of the 60,000 who have migrated through the *kairylman* program, numbers that pale in comparison with neighboring countries' initiatives to resettle their diasporas. The popularity of ethnic return programs—both from the perspective of ethnic return migrants and governments with policy aims—illustrates the allure of myths about homeland that stretch back in time and across borders. The story of the Pamiri Kyrgyz also demonstrates just how fragile these myths are, as they crumbled under the logistical demands of large-scale migration. ■

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*Left: Several thousand ethnic Kyrgyz have lived in a narrow, mountainous area in Afghanistan's Wakhan Corridor for nearly a century.*

*Right: Pamir Mountains. Photo by Colleen Wood.*



