

# Kyrgyzstan, the Closet Country

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My initial inclination when I arrived here was to compare the conditions to those I am familiar with in Romania. The comparison was evident - poor roads, smoky cars, old apartments, hard faces, little shops and vendor stands where people are trying to eek out a living, selling one cigarette at a time. I also saw evidence of new investment - gas stations, clean stores, tasteful clothing, even a frequent spotting of a Mercedes on the city streets. I learned later that the Mercedes are usually brought here from Germany after they no longer meet the German ecological codes, proving that poor countries like Kyrgyzstan get the garage sale leftovers. I also saw most people walking or taking a crowded bus, but no horse-drawn carts as is common in Romania. They don't need exercise programs to keep them thin, it comes quite naturally.

This region is strategically positioned at the crossroads of the East and the West. Alexander the Great and Marco Polo recognized its value as a trade route. Bishkek, the capital city, is directly in the path of the famous Silk Road. Kyrgyzstan (the place of the Kyrgyz) can trace its roots far deeper, and show evidence, even today, of its tribal history. The symbol on its flag is like a sun with 40 rays - one for each tribe, complemented by an architectural artifact of the yurt, the traditional tent of the nomadic people. I found that decisions about who to hire, even in this troubled economy, are influenced strongly by what the clan connections are. The clans were brought together around 1860 by a wise leader from this area, the grandfather of one of the faculty doctors. He united the nomads and convinced the Russians to come to defend the region against the Chinese. It seemed like a good idea at the time.

Now the Russians and the Kyrgyz live together in roughly equal numbers, but with an uneasy collaboration. Some Russians moved here for the excellent weather and the beauty of the mountains, some reaching to over 24,000 feet. Others moved with the munitions industry, since this closet of a country was a perfect setting to keep secrets. Still others were moved here for reasons known only to the authorities. For those Russians this was a Second Siberia. But their identity is not to be confused with the Kyrgyz. They look more European, many with blond hair, but if you ask them where they are from, they are likely to think of themselves as from the former Soviet Union rather than Kyrgyzstan. The Kyrgyz are distinctively Asian in appearance, with black hair and dark eyes, and round faces reminiscent of Mongolian stereotypes. It is as strange to hear them speak Russian rather than Chinese as it is to hear a black person speak Dutch. Their food is not the kind you'd find in an American Chinese restaurant. There are no egg rolls here, but lots of finely chopped vegetables. Mutton and chicken are their staple meats and sunflower seeds are a chief source of protein.

Moslem traditions seem to have settled lightly on Kyrgyzstan. These are Sunni Moslems rather than the more fundamentalist version found in places like Iran and Iraq. They may know what the Koran is, but be unfamiliar with its contents. I saw one major mosque in Bishkek, but they are not on every street corner like Christian Reformed Churches in Grand Rapids or Holland. It is part of their folk tradition more than a foundation for their society. Christian churches have formed here with little opposition, but their influence is small. The Russians prided themselves in being a godless society. It will take more than a little time for that to change.

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It is much more difficult to gauge their level of hope or despair. Their accepted beliefs and ways of life were not considered all that oppressive to them for the 70 years they were under Soviet rule. It must have been a real shock to endure the collapse of the Soviet Union. All that they knew as familiar suddenly became obsolete. It was as though the leaders and their philosophies were considered a Grand Oops overnight. They still revere Lenin, and carefully maintain statues of him pointing the way to prosperity. They know they're in a new world now, but they're not sure how to act - probably a lot like anyone from the West who visits this culture. In Romania, I'm told the people always hoped America would deliver them from their dictator. Here, people seem to grieve the consistency and dependability of the former system. They didn't necessarily want to be delivered. In 1991, a referendum affirmed that the majority wanted to stay a part of Russia, but the motherland didn't give them the option, leaving them to fend for themselves as orphans along with a dozen other republics. It was as though the house around the closet collapsed, leaving nothing to give it identity and even less to recommend itself.

If they suffered before, they certainly suffer now. With unemployment near 50% and the inflation rate about the same, it's no wonder they don't smile much. The average income is about one-third of a livable wage, even for doctors, which means that there is an unofficial economy more than three times the official economy. Between bribery and clan connections, a free-market economy with sustainable integrity will have a rough road to travel.

Kyrgyzstan doesn't have the orphanages of Romania, but the family values may be just as dubious. Fathers can't touch their newborns until they get home from the hospital - about a week under the best circumstances. For decades, the routine was, as soon as they were potty-trained, the kids were taken to Kindergarten, which is a combination of day care, pre-school and Kindergarten. The expression in Russian is that parents "give their children" to Kindergarten, as though they relinquish a certain portion of their personal responsibility. Economic hardships are making Kindergartens more of an elective now, but parents still have to be absent from home a lot to make ends meet.

The challenges for an American in Kyrgyzstan are enormous. On the one hand, the people seem eager for knowledge that will help them catch up with the world economy. On the other hand, they are afraid to take risks or to stand out. Embarrassment is the worst form of social sanction, so for them to try and fail is worse than to try at all. How can they blend world-class entrepreneurship with historical, social and tribal constraints? It is as though they are being dragged into the 21st Century with quiet desperation, like a teenager caught between the simplicity of childhood and the call to be independent.

But the Kyrgyz are to be commended for their progressive spirit. Among the former Soviet Republics, Kyrgyzstan is taking bold steps. They received and accepted the advice of the World Health Organization and the World Bank in planning the reform of their health care system. They realized that \$4 per person per year for health care needs to be rationed much more carefully than their specialty-dominated system allowed. Bishkek has 47 hospitals for about a million people, many of them built to care for WWII casualties in what was considered a relatively safe zone of the world theater. In the U.S., that market might support a half-dozen hospitals, even though the health care economy provides over \$4,000 per person per year. They made a bold commitment to retrain specialists as generalists, to establish family practice as the most desirable of medical occupations. Their early success is spotty, but hopeful. Only 20 - 25% of the last year's graduating residents in all specialties are now working in medicine, partly since they can earn more money in just about any other occupation. The country committed to family group practices without knowing much of what they were getting into. The reform project also calls for a capitated payment system similar to the purest form of an American HMO, which will undoubtedly result in massive hospital consolidations and specialty physician unemployment. Two steps forward, one step back - that seems to be par for the course in international development.

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My meager role in all this was to design management systems for a model family practice clinic, and to train those in leadership roles for the kinds of challenges they are likely to face. I don't know now why I thought two weeks would be enough. Two years would just be a drop in the bucket. Reforms like these will take generations. But we're taking baby steps, and those are necessary before we can expect to see more enduring progress. And for what it's worth, other former Soviet Republics are watching Kyrgyzstan with great interest. If reform works here, they may be quick to follow suit.

But I am finding deep satisfaction in sharing my knowledge, in offering hope and optimism where it is in short supply. It will take great patience before we see great progress, but persistence and faith must be imported by Americans and others if progress is to occur at all. This kind of change must be measured one person at a time. If hope is contagious at all - and I believe it is - then real economic and societal change, and a rekindling of the human spirit, must begin by sowing grains the size of a mustard seed.