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# Has immobility been left behind in migration regulatory infrastructures?

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## Abstract

The article brings the concept of the immobile left-behind population into the migration infrastructure debates focusing on countries of migrants' origin. Drawing on an analysis of government's migration policy in Kyrgyzstan and interviews with stakeholders in rural areas, the article concludes that the government relies on a traditional sectoral approach and agriculture in this regard and stands separately from mobility contexts. The policy discourse around outgoing migration focuses on mobility but less engages with return migration and the situation with left behind. We show how remittances-dependant country keeps migration policy as a non-active management tool. A starting point for a more holistic policy approach that includes the left-behind population would be facilitating discussion of left-behind needs in regions with active outmigration, including a wide range of stakeholders from migrants, family members, local authorities and migrant organizations. That would require essential changes in how policies are formulated and implemented, including introducing a cross-cutting and multi-level governance approach.

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## INTRODUCTION

Mobility bias is a part and parcel of migration studies. Inevitably, it is an integral bias of migration policies too. Focusing on Kyrgyzstan, one of the most remittance-dependent countries in the world, where 1.1 million of the population out of 6.6 million work abroad (Azattyk, 2022), this article puts forward an unpopular but still important question – whether the population of ‘stayers’ is located within migration governance or are they ‘left behind’?

Kyrgyzstan consistently ranks among the top five countries in the world in terms of the ratio of money remittances to GDP over the period of 2010–2019. The latest available data shows, that remittances contribute 29.6% of the GDP in Kyrgyzstan (Knomad, 2019). The World Bank data shows that remittances have been growing steadily in Kyrgyzstan since 2000, with a slight drop due to external economic shocks in 2008 and 2014 (The World Bank, 2019). Since Kyrgyzstan joined the Eurasian Economic Union in 2015, it simplified the mobility and employment of its citizens within the Union, including Russia which continues to be the most common destination for Kyrgyzstan's migrants (1.06 million as of February 2022).

While for a long time, Kyrgyzstan's migration policy was fragmented and spread across different stakeholders, a new Concept of Migration Policy has been adopted in 2021. It aims ‘to regularise migration processes’ and ‘mitigating the adverse effects of migration and creating conditions for good migration governance that would benefit migrants and socio-economic development of the Kyrgyz Republic’ (UN Migration, 2022). Still, there are questions that arise on the implementation of this Concept given both the economic and political issues.

Drawing on the concept of regulatory infrastructures (Lin et al., 2017; Xiang & Lindquist, 2014), immobility (Schewel, 2020) and ‘left behind’ (Biao, 2007), this study is set out to determine how the state of migrant origin approach the ‘left behind’ population in rural areas. There is considerable research on the role of migration policies in host countries for migrants from Kyrgyzstan and other Central Asian countries (see Malakhov & Simon, 2018; Reeves, 2013; Round & Kuznetsova, 2016; Urinboyev, 2020), the role of international organizations in migration governance in Kyrgyzstan (Korneev, 2018) and return migration (Thieme, 2014). However, there is a gap in the literature on the role of Kyrgyzstan's state policies towards outgoing labour migration and the left-behind population. This echoes the internationally recognized need for research on sending countries' policies towards migration (Lee, 2017; Østergaard-Nielsen, 2016) as most of the studies are devoted to the countries of destination rather than countries of origin.

International migration for a long time has been conceptualized as an intensively mediated process (Castles, 2004). Migration scholarship highlights the huge significance of migration policies to the dynamics and character of population mobility (De Haas et al., 2019). Migration governance embraces policies of supranational institutions and governments of both sending countries and countries of destination. The common interpretation of migration governance relates to norms, rules, policies and practices which manage the flow and type of migration (Betts, 2011). As Triandafyllidou (2022) asserts, we need to de-centre migration governance research both from the geopolitical perspective, spatial (views from the city vs views from rural areas), ‘with reference to the actors involved (state, civil society, private sector, migrants and their households), as well as cultural de-centring’ (p.823). Acknowledging the role of communities and migrants, the paper puts the state regulatory infrastructures at the centre of analysis. The attention to the left-behind population in rural communities allows us to de-centre migration governance research in a spatial perspective.

In this article, we argue that in the case of Kyrgyzstan as a ‘country of migrant origin’, the policy discourse around outgoing migration focuses on mobility but engages less with return migration and the situation with the left behind. After introducing the research methodology, we bring the concept of the left-behind population into the migration infrastructure debates. Then we explore Kyrgyzstan's state approach to rural areas within the major programme documents regulating migration and the National Development Strategy. The following analysis focuses on understanding left-behind households and returnees' issues and regulatory infrastructures' (potential) role in supporting them and mitigating social and economic risks in Kyrgyzstan. Then, drawing on analysis of state programmes and interviews with local stakeholders, we show how by keeping

migration policy as a non-active management tool before adapting the 2021 concept, the government was contra-balancing a lack of its own capacity in migration infrastructures. In conclusion, we suggest a more holistic approach to policy formulation on the national level that redefines migration including the left-behind population.

## DATA AND METHODS

The paper is based on 14-month research conducted in 2019–2020 which included critical discourse analysis of policy documents, analysis of public events and local elite interviews.

The critical discourse analysis employed Bacchi's (2009) 'What's the problem represented to be?' (WPR) approach to reveal the Republic of Kyrgyzstan government's constructs the emigration policies and how migrants left-behind members of households in rural areas are reflected in its leading documents on migration and development. Following Bacchi (2009: 48) and Bonfanti's (2014) implementation of WPR regarding migration policies, we were directed our analysis by the following questions (though did not include considerations on how the representation has been produced or disseminated):

1. What is the problem represented to be in a specific policy?
2. What presuppositions or assumptions underlie this representation of the 'problem'?
3. How has this representation of the problem come about?
4. What is left unproblematic in this problem representation? Where are the silences? Can the problem be thought about differently?
5. What effects are produced by this representation of the problem?

At first, we analysed documents in the governmental repository of the Kyrgyz Republic ([www.cbd.minjust.gov.kg](http://www.cbd.minjust.gov.kg); [www.toktom.kg](http://www.toktom.kg)) to reveal the character of engaging with migration issues. Then, in order to understand the position of the State in relation to migration issues, we studied two main documents that set out national development priorities: the National Development Strategy of Kyrgyzstan for 2019–2040 (Cabinet of Ministers of the Kyrgyz Republic, 2019) and the Concept of Migration Policy of Kyrgyz Republic for 2021–2030 (Concept, 2021) (further on – the Strategy and the Concept).

Additionally, the authors were observing and analysing public events with different stakeholders (governmental institutions, international organizations and local non-governmental organizations (NGOs)) on migration which took place during 2019–2020 in Kyrgyzstan. Some events were organized by the authors, in a few the authors took part as participants.

We also conducted ten in-depth interviews with local government representatives and migrant family members from a two-month field study in 16 villages in autumn 2020 in Naryn, Batken, Jalal-Abad oblast as well as discussions with staff from the International Organization of Migration (IOM) and United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) in Bishkek in 2020. The research received approval from the Ethical committees of the higher education institutions that led this study. The interviews were conducted with adults over 18 years old who provided informed consent to participate in research. All informants were able to withdraw from the study.

Kyrgyzstan is a country characterized by significant political dynamism. During our research, the country experienced a violent change of power, followed by several subsequent alterations to the government's structure (Doolotkeldieva, 2021). As a result, these developments impacted on the tempo and implementation of our study, and we conducted follow-up monitoring and follow-up conversations with our respondents to clarify some data and updates regarding regulatory changes while monitoring the field during 2021–2022.

## BRINGING 'LEFT-BEHIND' POPULATION INTO THE MIGRATION INFRASTRUCTURES DEBATES

Immobility is an essential part of the mobility continuum and can be involuntary or voluntary and 'moves migration decision-making models away from a rational economic calculus' (Schewel, 2020, p.347). The COVID-19 pandemic amplified discussions on forced immobility as many people could not migrate for work which made it challenging for economic survival (see De Backer et al., 2022; Martin & Bergmann, 2021). Following Schewel, we understand immobility 'as continuity in an individual's place of residence over a period of time' (2020, p. 344). Since immobility is relative in terms of space and time, immobile population includes both those who have never migrated, but also those who had migration experience. Ye (2018) distinguishes between left-behind stayers in rural China (those whose household's members migrated) and the non-left-behind people. In this article, we focus on those stayers, whose household members migrate or who have been migrants themselves in a past, using the term 'left-behind'.

As Toyota et al. (2007) stressed in relation to Asia, the 'migration-left-behind nexus is ... inflected to capture a wide range of significant livelihood strategies among a large number of mobile and not-so-mobile people' (p.160). Importantly, some family members are only able to stay because their relatives can support their livelihoods via remittances (Stockdale & Haartsen, 2018). The rural stayers represent diverse and often positive strategies relied on their agency (Stockdale & Haartsen, 2018), such as, for example, related to empowerment of women as Ahmed (2020) in Pakistan demonstrated. Still, there are examples of vulnerability, which is often associated with educational outcomes of children of migrant parents left behind (see, for example, Zhou et al., 2014), children mental health (Antia et al., 2020), and health of left-behind parents (Pan & Dong, 2020). The migration of husband, as Reeves ethnographic study among women stayers in rural areas of Uzbekistan showed, affect women position in a patriarchal domestic setting 'where female movement within and outside the home ... can be movement out of place' (2011, p.569), while bringing empowerment for some, and extra-control and restrictions for others from in-laws.

At the same time, there is a gap on placing immobility and 'left behind' into the study of migration policies of sending countries as often it is considered via aspirational lenses. Though as the study of 'left-behind' people in rural China demonstrates, 'Their problems cannot just be attributed to being left-behind individuals; instead, the fundamental cause is that many rural communities as a whole have been left behind economically and socially' (Biao, 2007, p.187). Similarly, in Kyrgyzstan, while there is a recognition of the massive impact of migration on the country's development, the evidence of the human cost of such development, precisely left-behind communities, which older adults, children and women mainly constitute, is overlooked.

To fill this lacuna, we employ a migration infrastructures approach. Migration infrastructures have become one of the main vectors of academic discourse on mobilities in the context of East and Southeast Asia (Lin et al., 2017; Xiang & Lindquist, 2014), partly because the role of migration infrastructures is particularly visible in the region due to the historically significant role of private recruitment brokers (Lindquist et al., 2012; Lindquist, 2017) and state-led emigration (Lee, 2017). As Lin et al. stressed, 'by recognising migration as the contestational result of these moving in infrastructuring, it then becomes possible to appreciate what makes migrant mobilities 'real' and 'noteworthy' in the first place' (Lin et al., 2017, p.169). Migration infrastructures include state infrastructures for mobility control (Xiang, 2017), technological, regulatory and commercial infrastructure, institutions and actors that facilitate and condition mobility (Lin et al., 2017; Xiang & Lindquist, 2014). Migration infrastructures also uniquely shape migrant experiences of irregularity (Sigona et al., 2021). While all these infrastructures are interconnected, in this article, we focus on the regulatory infrastructures. Xiang and Lindquist consider them via 'state apparatus and procedures for documentation, licensing, training and other purposes' (2014, p.125). We can presume that the focus of regulatory infrastructures on facilitation of mobility is rooted with the large dependency of economy from migration and lack of capacities in governing facilitating both mobility and immobility. The migration regimes of countries with the large number of emigrants, such as Mexico from 1974, Dominican Republic, Morocco from the 1980s, are more focused on individuals 'after they have already become migrants to maximise

national gains from migration' around existing flows (Lee, 2017, p.1458). Lee defines such type of migration regime as accommodating. We argue that regulatory infrastructures can be analysed via not only mobility but immobility approach that could capture the way what kind of policies are in place regarding migrants and their households in a complex spatial and temporal dimension of migration.

Some countries, such as the Philippines, are examples of highly directive migration policy which facilitates migration flows and provides training for migrants and support for return migrants (Testaverde et al., 2017), though there are still some issues in reintegration policies towards return migrants (Saguin, 2020). That is because such policies access returnees as economically active and entrepreneurial rather than aiming to provide social protection (Saguin, 2020). Globally, migrants and left-behind population are not a 'welfare target' for either receiving or sending countries (Boccagni, 2017), which is again one of the outcomes of considering migration from the development nexus. We do need to focus on 'embodied costs as experienced by left-behind' to unsettle assumptions regarding the migration and development nexus (Torres & Carte, 2016, p. 403). So, by bringing the left-behind populations into the migration infrastructure debates, we can not only de-center migration governance research placing it into the spatial and temporal domains of mutual dependency between mobility and immobility but go beyond the migration-development nexus. Drawing on such a mixed methodology, we analyse regulatory infrastructures in Kyrgyzstan focusing on their approaches towards the left behind in rural areas.

## RURAL DIMENSION OF MIGRATION CONTINUUM – A MISSING POINT OF MIGRATION REGULATORY INFRASTRUCTURES?

Despite the fact that Kyrgyzstan signed many international documents regarding labour migration<sup>1</sup> the national policies towards outgoing and return labour migrants were very limited prior to 2021. The analysis of documents in the governmental repository of the Kyrgyz Republic revealed only a few documents related to the Government Migration Policy: 'The Program for Assistance to Employment of the Population and Regulation of Internal and External Labor Migration until 2020', Law of 2006 'On External Labor Migration', Law of 2002 'On Internal Migration', Law of 2007 'On State Guarantee of Ethnic Kyrgyz Relocating to the Kyrgyz Republic', 'Concept of the State Demographic and Migration Policy of the Kyrgyz Republic' (expired in 2004), 'Concept of the State Migration Policy of the Kyrgyz Republic until 2010'. In all six documents relating to migration policy, migration was never considered as part of the national economy despite the growing remittance flow (Murzakulova, 2020). By mirroring this approach between 1991 and 2022 migration governance and regulation were alternately in the mandate of nine different governmental institutions with a diverse power status: from a department in the Ministry of Labour and Social Protection in the 1990s, to the Ministry of Migration and Youth in 2012 and a Migration Public Service after 2015. In the wake of political crises in the country and the arrival of the new government in 2021, the Migration Service was abolished with its functions transferred to the Ministry of Foreign Affairs (Nurmatov, 2021), and several months after, in 2021, the government established Ministry of Labour, Social Affairs and Migration.

The National Development Strategy of Kyrgyzstan for 2019–2040 mentioned 'migration' and 'migrants' 15 times in a 150 pages document. The Strategy has internal tension as on the one hand, it declares 'We must focus our efforts on creating opportunities for the able-bodied population to live and work in their homeland. It is necessary to increase the motivation of young people to live and create in Kyrgyzstan.' On the contrary, the strategy discusses the prospects for expanding the geography of labour migration and repeats the completion of all kinds of protection of migrants' rights and asserts pride in labour migrants: 'Our labor migrants have clearly demonstrated their capabilities, hard work and creative purposefulness in the vastness of the world economy'. However, the rural perspective or left-behind families have not been addressed in the document.

The main message of the 2018 Strategy is development through urbanization: "It is impossible to constantly 'expand in breadth, we need to grow upward'. We must change the image of our cities and villages, give them a

modern look". In this process, migrants are assigned the role of investors. The Strategy continues and strengthens this direction by the creation of regulatory measures, tax, administrative and other preferences for migrants and former Kyrgyzstan citizens who decided to invest in businesses in their homeland.

The recently adopted Concept of Migration policy mentions rural areas only in a context of push factors of migration. See, for example, 'In conditions of limited resources, especially in rural areas, migration of yours within their own country or abroad currently is considered as the only opportunity of employment and strengthening of social status' (Concept, 2021, Para 2, p. 3). However, it does not flag up opportunities for agrarian and broader rural development linked to remittances.

In our analysis, it became apparent that each document under consideration holds distinct political significance. Laws, for instance, function as crucial reference points for state institutions, shaping their regulatory perspectives. The political weight of the Concept, on the other hand, is more intricate in nature. As a public official explained during our interview in Bishkek (2021), the Concept serves as a guiding framework for institutional priorities and serves to align cross-sectoral interests under umbrella goals. Each state institution designated in the Concept possesses a corresponding budget and action plan for its implementation. Moreover, the Concept serves as a compass for donors and international organizations in shaping their project interventions based on the goals and action plan outlined in the Concept. Therefore, the political weight of the Concept is rooted in its capacity to define state priorities and guide the allocation of financial resources accordingly. It will be shown below that the potential of the state policy to facilitate or direct migration including left-behind is not implicit. In these terms, the migration regime in Kyrgyzstan might be seen, if to use Lee's (2017) terminology, as accommodating because it adapts its policies around existing flows and focuses on individual after them became migrants.

## 'LEFT BEHIND' IN KYRGYZSTAN'S RURAL AREAS

Kyrgyzstan is a mountainous country, which poses challenges for farming. Early frosts, long winters, spring floods, droughts, soil salinization and the high risk of natural hazards are common stressors for the country's agricultural sector (Bobojonov & Aw-Hassan, 2014; Mirzabaev, 2013; Mogilevskii et al., 2017). This situation is further aggravated by the deterioration of irrigation and drainage networks and other Soviet-era agricultural infrastructures and lack of investment in this sector.

The employment rate declined from 60.1% of the total population of working age in 2006 to 55.9% in 2017 in all sectors. While the population increased by 16% during the last decade, employment grew by only 7.6% due to limited opportunities caused by the slow development of the national economy (Tilekeyev et al., 2019). Rural residents, who account for 63 % of the country's population (World Bank, 2022), have to actively explore external labour markets, which led to the situation when migration is the only way for employment for a significant part of Kyrgyzstan's youth. In this context, labour migration acts as a strategy to minimize risks in conditions of high uncertainty around agricultural income, but this does not automatically generate sustainable agriculture practices (Mogilevskii et al., 2017; Sagynbekova, 2017).

Migration has a heterogeneous impact on livelihoods in the rural sector. Against the background of growth in financial remittances and a relative decline in agricultural production, non-farm activities are responsible for a growing proportion of the rural economy, which, according to researchers, provides 40% of rural employment and accounts for 48% of working time in rural areas (Atamanov & van den Berg, 2012, see also Zhunusova & Herrmann, 2018). Many of these non-farm activities are trade and services linked to agriculture.

Still, unemployment is a massive issue together with the lack of investments into the irrigation infrastructure, and also limited access to fair and accessible financial credits (see, for example, Gicquel et al., 2016). Migration in Kyrgyzstan pushes the left-behind youth to become unpaid family workers especially females (Dávalos et al., 2017). The population is ageing because of the out migration. If traditionally, the social structure of Kyrgyz society in rural areas used to be represented by an extended family (Thieme, 2014), the emergence of a new type

of trans-local migrant families is transforming this practice. Migrant parents leave their children for longer periods which leads to an increased load on the older adults (Isabaeva, 2011) and female family members (Karymshakov & Sulaimanova, 2017).

The social consequences of migration are widely articulated in public discourse through the problems of social orphanhood and children of migrants (Marat kyzy, 2017; Maral FM, 2018; Madanbekov, 2019). According to the United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF), 227 thousand children in Kyrgyzstan were left by their migrant parents (UNICEF, 2019). The government started addressing the issues of the large number of resonant cases of violence against children left by migrants in the care of their relatives. Since 2014, the government has expanded the mandate of schoolteachers to include the collection of data on children whose parents are in migration and the subsequent monitoring of their living conditions. Rural schools in communities with high-migration outflows are overwhelmed with the necessity of this additional but unpaid work with children left behind (Murzakulova & Abdoubaetova, 2022). Recording the number of left-behind children of migrants by school teachers and local social workers as a government response to the absence of centralized register. While there is some attention to the situation with children left-behind in rural areas (though usually this attention is not supported financially), other categories of migrant households are deprioritized in government policies.

The economic and social consequences of temporary border closures in 2020, and the decline of employment opportunities in host countries, has resulted in decreasing remittances for many households (Kuznetsova et al., 2020), who may need to turn to agricultural activities as a replacement for their lost incomes. This replacement, in most cases, could be only partial, thus there is a high risk of falling into poverty. As one representative of a local government institution mentioned during an interview, 'It is difficult now. It is impossible to go anywhere, transfers have also fallen. It is difficult time; the state helps a little with food products. The only income is from agriculture, as all the other work, such as construction, taxi services are all up' (Batken, Kyrgyzstan, 21 April 2020). Only migrant households with diversified sources of income, such as from trade and agriculture in addition to remittances, were less concerned about their prospects for survival than households whose primary income is from remittances.

The lack of state involvement, however, is partly compensated by the local informal initiatives. Migrants and diasporas played a crucial role during the COVID-19 pandemic in supporting their home communities. There was much evidence during our fieldwork about using remittances to buy oxygen masks and medicines for villages. Many medical doctors and nurses with the Republic of Kyrgyzstan origin from Russia and Turkey were volunteering during the pandemic in Kyrgyzstan.

## 'LEFT BEHIND' BY THE STATE?

As shown above, the major regulatory documents regarding migration in Kyrgyzstan pay little attention to migration as a process or migrants as agents of change/development. The Concept reproduces neoliberal rhetoric of dependency and derides the lack of employment as a personal choice rather than the result of structural inequality. Moreover, it stigmatizes those who are 'left behind': 'Migration feeds the culture of dependency where all families live off remittances' (Concept, 2021, p.9). Despite the fact that the economic effects of migration (decades of relatively stable transfers) and social changes driven by migrants are deeply intertwined with the modern development of Kyrgyzstan, both strategies devote less than 0.1% of the text to them. Migrants are considered as subjects of potential investment and migration as a process that needs to be supported through foreign policy instruments.

There are no specialized government programmes in Kyrgyzstan that support left-behind migrant families. Among other things, this lack of any government attempt to address one of the most obvious development issues in Kyrgyzstan might be related to the point of view that the government is already overwhelmed with social agenda and adding any additional bit of responsibility is considered as unfeasible/unacceptable. Indeed, in



Kyrgyzstan, general government spending on the social sector (social insurance and social protection, education, health care, culture) constituted 62.9% of total government expenditures or 20.6% GDP (IMF, 2019). This high share of government resources allocated for these government functions reflects the inherited commitments of the Kyrgyz state related to the population's universal access to basic secondary education, primary and some secondary health care, old age pensions and other social achievements of the society of Kyrgyzstan. Reflecting the government's perception of this situation, the recent government strategic document 'The Programme Development of the Kyrgyz Republic for 2018-2022. Unity. Confidence. Creation' formulates an objective to 'ensure dynamic transition from social to investment orientation of the budget...' (The Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Kyrgyz Republic, 2019).

This situation is largely due to the government's de-facto policy aimed at reducing the number of recipients of state benefits. The primary challenge resulting in migrant families falling outside the social welfare system stems from the targeting of benefits based on the 'needs' (*nuzhdaemost*) of families. The means testing methodology is reliant on social workers' visits of households and evaluation of their financial status. The needs are currently defined in a domain of income and assets rather than complex needs including care needs. Families - particularly those reliant on remittances due to labor migration - may face challenging life circumstances, rendering them without income, despite possessing visual 'wealth' like a house, livestock or appliances. But for social workers this kind of 'wealth' is an argument to withdraw families from social benefits. This echoes with Boccagni, that in migrants countries of origin welfare policies often focus on poverty reduction, 'while migrant vulnerability is much too complex and faceted to be grasped in such an optic' (2017: 173).

At the current level of institutional development in Kyrgyzstan, one could not expect the government (central or local) to really support those migrant households which are in need. Access to services (schools, health facilities, roads) may be considered as something for government to target because the out-migration of many most active adult members reduces the community's lobbying capacity for the infrastructure maintenance and development.

Interviews with local government officials in Batken, Jalal-Abad and Naryn oblasts demonstrated that issues of rural development and the left-behind are not on their agenda either. All participants were quite surprised with the question: 'What actions or initiatives exist at the local level to support migrant families?' The responses were quite similar. For example, one representative of a local authority in one of the villages of Batken oblast answered directly: 'Why should we help them?' (interview, November 2020). Many participants mentioned that, to the contrary, village associations and local authorities often ask migrants to help with some funds: 'We often turn to migrants ourselves to help raise money for public needs.' (Interview, November 2020).

The research demonstrated that the local authorities, like the national one, do not see migrant families as a category for support. As one of the representatives of local administration in a village in Batken oblast mentioned:

We have categories of socially vulnerable groups, they receive benefits from the state, we do not have a category regarding migrant families. They can receive assistance if it is a single parent family, if their financial situation is difficult and they are on the list of those in need in such cases, we make rounds of yards.

(Interview, November 2020)

At the same time, our field data shows that local authorities can exclude migrant families from the list of socially vulnerable when they have additional resources/assets, which can often be household appliances purchased with remittances. A car is a common investment of migrant workers (Abashin, 2021), as our field data shows, and its appearance in a village can lead to the exclusion of a migrant family from the list of socially vulnerable. This happened, for instance, with one of our research participants, a 61-year-old women from Jalal-Abad oblast:

My son brought an old Zhiguli [Lada] from Russia; this car was so old that it constantly broke down. After a few months we stopped receiving child benefits and when I went to deal with it in Aiyl

Okmotu, I was told that, 'Now you have a car in the house, additional earnings, you do not need acutely now. Money is already scarce in the budget, better redistribute to those who need more.' I then scolded my son, 'What is the use of your car, why did you bring it?' That's how it stands in our yard without any use (...), my son left after six months for Russia.

(Interview, November 2020)

Many projects delivered by international and civil society organizations aim at mitigating the social consequences of migration. The Partnership Civil Platform Central Asia in Motion, which unites more than 30 NGOs in Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan, has created Small Community Councils<sup>2</sup> at the local level in Kyrgyzstan, which bring together representatives of local authorities, social and medical workers, women's and youth committees and active local actors. The council's tasks include identifying migrant families and providing legal support locally, monitoring the situation of migrant workers families in Kyrgyzstan and building the capacity of potential migrant families through information provision, training and seminars. In 2012, this group facilitated the creation of the Major Public Council, which aims to promote and protect the rights of left-behind members of migrant families at the national level.

Our field data also shows that no one from ten representatives interviewed from local authorities knew about this network. In our survey we asked which NGOs and international organizations work with migrant families in communities and found the presence of these actors in the field mostly as actors who undertook research (mainly quantitative surveys) but not in the implementation of programmes. These results of the study are largely due to our small sample of 16 villages in three regions of the country, but also probably signal the lack of priority of the problems of left behinds in the NGO sector too. This may also partly explain the weak presence of the state in the migration infrastructure too since the voluntary sector has not yet formed actors capable of promoting an agenda of the left behind.

This was echoed by the representative of the NGO that works with return migrants and their families across the country who highlighted that the local authorities do not have any regular work with such categories of the population:

There is no system of regulation of interactions between migrants and state authorities. ...It happens as revealing problems and priorities or via migrants' family members or return migrants – they communicate, meet. Social media and gadgets help to be in touch. Local authorities are mainly receivers of help. However, there is no targeting systemic interaction.

(interview with NGO lead, Bishkek, July 2020)

In some countries such as Moldova, the Philippines, and others, policies towards diaspora increase their capacities to support local development (e.g. Chirvas, 2022). Kyrgyzstan's authorities also try to engage with diaspora. Since 2015, three councils for relations with compatriots and diasporas have been established in Kyrgyzstan. In 2015, the first Council for Relations with Compatriots was created under the government (The Government of the Kyrgyz Republic, 2015), in 2017 a similar council was created under the President (Kabar.kg, 2017), and in 2020, after a political coup, a council was created under the Zhogorku Kenesh (Kabar.kg, 2020).

An analysis of the agenda of all three councils show that they differ little in the range of issues considered: protection of the rights of migrants abroad, attracting investments from migrants, and adoption of the 'Mekenim Card' which will make it easier to stay at country (registration) for those who have renounced Kyrgyz citizenship.

An analysis of the three councils from a functional point of view provides little insight into the rationality for having three overlapping structures. However, their connection to different levels of power, and especially the last council created under the Zhogorku Kenesh after the political unrest in 2020, may shed light on the functionality of the councils as a symbolic resource.

Each of the three councils was established in the context of major political events. For example, the first council was created 6 months before the competitive parliamentary elections in 2015. The second council was created a month after the 2017 presidential election, which was won by a less popular candidate from the ruling

Social-democratic party. The latest parliamentary council, convened in 2020, was prepared a month before the controversial referendum on changing the political system from parliamentary republic to presidential and follow-up presidential elections. Since the council meetings did not lead to any noticeable decisions for migrants, we can say that they were used as an informational event rather than a political instrument for formulating migration policy.

## CONCLUSION

The article addresses a gap in both regulatory infrastructure studies and immobility approaches regarding the role of the state in addressing the left-behind population in rural areas experiencing population outflow due to labour migration. We argue that bringing an immobility approach into the migration regulatory infrastructures allows us to reveal policies towards migration in complex spatial and temporal dimensions that include population not-yet mobile, return migrants and stayers.

From one side, the lack of firm state control on emigration is common in the context of a global trend of the 'governance of networks'. As remittances provide a stable income for a country without a visible state control, one might conclude that alienation of the state from migration policy is not just evidence of lack of resources that would provide a formally organized regulatory infrastructure, but probably the strategy of relying on the self-organization of migrants and communities left behind. The informal migration networks already proved their efficiency during the COVID-19 pandemic. We show, that Kyrgyzstan's government, by keeping migration policy as a non-active management tool before adapting the 2021 Concept (that still does not provide a policy towards the left behind), is contra-balancing its lack of own capacity in migration infrastructures.

The Kyrgyzstan's government relies on a traditional sectoral approach and rural development in this regard and stands separately from mobility contexts. Similarly, migration political discourse lacks discussions on the situation with the social aspects of rural development, especially regarding households left behind. Moreover, it stigmatizes those who left behind as defendants from remittances. The National Development strategy does not offer ways to mitigate risks and vulnerabilities that arose from migration and impact both stayers and those who migrate. Together, it reproduces the vision of migration as a self-organized instrument of economic development focusing precisely on accommodating and employing migration and overlooking the mobility continuum and its vulnerabilities.

We suggest a more holistic approach to policy that redefines migration including left-behind population (see also Murzakulova, 2022). A starting point should be to facilitate discussion of left-behind needs in regions with active outmigration, including a wide range of stakeholders from migrants, family members, local authorities and migrant organizations should also become active participants in these discussions. This approach would meet the needs of communities with a large number of emigrants and be linked to social development programmes that currently lack partnership between government, civic sectors and communities left behinds. That would require essential changes in how policies are formulated and implemented, including introducing a cross-cutting and multi-level governance approach.

Imposing migration as a cross-cutting issue in existing rural development programs and a support package for public services and social welfare in sending communities are required. A system for monitoring migration processes at the local level would be a crucial step. At present, the monitoring of migration in Kyrgyzstan is in its early stages. Creating an integrated system for monitoring migration processes, considering migrants themselves, children and older family members, would help promote the safety of left-behind family members and navigate a more precise distribution of limited government funds. It should also include the considerations of 'the gendered dynamics of migrating and staying' (Reeves, 2011) as it hugely affects lived experiences of household members.

There is a need for a complex policy towards migration in Kyrgyzstan which would involve close collaboration between the State Migration Service Ministry of Labour and Social Development, Ministry of Health Care and

Ministry of Economy together with international organizations and NGOs. It is time for policies to look at migration beyond the number of people crossing the border and remittances data, and to elaborate relevant and effective mechanisms of support for families who are 'left behind', internal migrants and returnees. It is also time for the Eurasian Economic Union to respond to the social consequences of migration and provide not only conditions for a single market but deliver social security for migrants.

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## DATA AVAILABILITY STATEMENT

The data that support the findings of this study are available on request from the corresponding author. The data are not publicly available due to privacy or ethical restrictions.

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## ENDNOTES

<sup>1</sup> That includes, for example, the Convention of the International Labor Organization (ILO) of June 8, 1949 N 97 concerning migrant workers; Convention of November 14, 2008 on the legal status of migrant workers and members of their families of the member states of the Commonwealth of Independent States; Protocol against the smuggling of migrants by land, sea and air, supplementing the UN Convention against Transnational Organized Crime (adopted by UN General Assembly resolution 55/25 of November 15, 2000), ILO Convention No. 143 of June 4, 1975 on the abuse of the area of migration and the provision of migrant workers; The International Convention on the Protection of the Rights of All Migrant Workers and Members of Their Families.

<sup>2</sup> As of September 2019, 35 small councils have been created. More information about the movement is available on the website: <http://camplatform.org/%d0%bc%d0%b0%d0%bb%d1%8b%d0%b9-%d0%be%d0%b1%d1%89%d0%b5%d1%81%d1%82%d0%b2%d0%b5%d0%bd%d0%bd%d1%8b%d0%b9-%d1%81%d0%be%d0%b2%d0%b5%d1%82-%d0%bc%d0%be%d1%81/>

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