TSU Center for Eurasian Studies

Expert Commentary № 16

*Viribus unitis*

April 17, 2025

# Sic est vita hominis – The Human Experience: Perspectives of Kyrgyz and Kazakh Students on the Academic, Residential, and Urban Environments of Tomsk

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The primary factor driving the large-scale educational migration from Kyrgyzstan to Russia and other countries is the weakness of the higher education system in Kyrgyzstan, particularly with regard to the composition of academic staff and the level of technical resources available. According to data as of the end of 2024, sixteen thousand Kyrgyz citizens were enrolled in Russian universities, of whom seven thousand were studying on a state-funded basis. In both 2024 and 2025, seven hundred quotas were allocated annually for Kyrgyz students to pursue studies at Russian institutions of higher education. At the beginning of the 2024–2025 academic year, approximately five hundred students originating from Kyrgyzstan were enrolled in Tomsk universities.

The principal reasons for educational migration from Kazakhstan to Russia are the high quality of Russian higher education and its economic affordability. Kazakhstan ranks as the leading country in terms of the number of students studying in Russia. According to the Embassy of Kazakhstan in Russia, by the end of 2023, approximately sixty-seven thousand Kazakhstani students were enrolled in Russian universities, with thirty thousand of them studying on a state-funded basis. At the beginning of the 2024–2025 academic year, 5,400 Kazakhstani citizens were enrolled in Tomsk universities, constituting 47.6 % of the total international student population in Tomsk's institutions of higher education.

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**The research was supported by a grant from the Russian Science Foundation, Project № 23-78-10036, https://rscf.ru/en/project/23-78-10036/**

Within the framework of a research project funded by the Russian Science Foundation, employing a targeted sampling strategy and the snowball sampling method, we conducted twenty individual semi-structured interviews with students who had come to study at universities in Tomsk from Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan. The participants included both undergraduate and graduate students, representing the titular ethnic groups of their respective countries as well as ethnic Russians, the latter group being more numerous.

**“Alea iacta est” (“The die is cast”)**

Students from Kyrgyzstan explain their choice to pursue education in Russia by citing a combination of personal and external factors. Among the external factors, the linguistic situation in Kyrgyzstan is frequently mentioned. Many students noted that “...it is absolutely necessary to know the Kyrgyz language because it is required in all universities, and it is also a subject on the entrance exams.” One illustrative example was given: “...one teacher allowed himself to say that if you are not Kyrgyz, I will not give you a grade of five, no matter how hard you study, I do not care...” It is important to clarify that according to the Constitution of the Kyrgyz Republic, the latest version of which was adopted in 2021, the Kyrgyz language is the state language, while Russian is the official language (Article 13). On this basis, Russian is considered “a subject of state recognition and is protected by the state.” These provisions are reaffirmed in the 2023 Constitutional Law “On the State Language of the Kyrgyz Republic.” Nevertheless, cultural distance, combined with the sharp reflections of representatives of different ethnic groups, contradicts these legal provisions and may be perceived as a push factor: “many Kyrgyz... want the Russians... to go back to Russia... we face with this very often...”

Corruption is often cited as a reason for refusing to study in Kyrgyzstan: “...bribes for passing tests, exams, and diplomas.” “...I know that there are lecturers who [pause] can only give a credit for money.” These two quotations come from ethnic Russian students. A third statement, from a representative of the indigenous ethnic group: “in Kyrgyzstan, everything can be resolved with money, that is, without studying at all... the quality of education, to be honest, is not very good... even if they do not attend classes, they bribe the teachers and still graduate.” Students also spoke about the quality of teaching at some universities in their homeland: “...there are teachers who... basically do not teach... they are not competent in their profession.” Comparisons were made regarding the level of training in humanities faculties: “...we... study strong programs in computer science here [in Tomsk], but there... they teach how to use Excel spreadsheets... even though it is the third year.” In Tomsk, applicants enrolled in fields of study for which, according to them, there were no quality equivalents in Kyrgyzstan: “...in my profession, agronomy, we do not have good universities. In general, agricultural education in Kyrgyzstan is poor.”

Personal reasons were articulated in terms of career prospects: “...what attracted me here is that there are many different opportunities for self-realization,” emotional preference: “...I want to stay in Russia... I even like the mentality here more,” and the expansion of social capital through

interaction with students from other countries: “Tomsk... is a city where there are many foreigners, and I wanted... to communicate with people of different worldviews.”

All our respondents studied in Tomsk on a state-funded basis, that was of great importance to them. Opportunities for such funding in Kyrgyzstan are limited: “it is very difficult for us to get state-funded places... because there are very few.” At the same time, some students approached their choice through a “price-quality” comparison rather than simply seeking any budget place: “When I took entrance exams at various universities, it was already clear... how the form of education would be conducted. In some places, everything was stricter, in others, it was very easy. Well, where it was easy to pass exams, it was immediately clear that the university had lowered standards for no reason. For very high standards, I would be foolish because I do not meet them. But the average level is exactly what I need and that is Tomsk.” Attention was also drawn to the financial aspects of student’s life: “...it is easier to find housing here, food is available at more affordable prices... the dormitory fees are the cheapest.”

Another reason for enrolling in Tomsk universities is the quotas allocated through Rossotrudnichestvo: “...I applied to Saint Petersburg State University, MGIMO..., the Higher School of Economics, and the Peoples’ Friendship University of Russia. ...then I withdrew my applications because I won a quota at Tomsk State University.”

The motivations for Kazakhstani students choosing to study in Russia do not differ significantly from those of students from Kyrgyzstan. The linguistic situation within Kazakhstan, specifically education in the national language, influences the migration of Russian-speaking populations. Students repeatedly noted in interviews that university education in Kazakhstan is conducted in Kazakh: “...I did not want to stay in Kazakhstan, at least because of the language. Because I do not know it, and I am not eager to learn it.” This also affects employment prospects - many employers prefer candidates who speak Kazakh: “...the situation in Kazakhstan now is such that without knowledge of the Kazakh language, it is very difficult to find a job.”

Students noted the presence of bias and inequality within the educational environment based on ethnic grounds: “I often participated in debates and performed quite well. And often I simply did not pass because of my Slavic face...” In the responses of some students, there was a clear expression of serious dissatisfaction with the current social and cultural situation in Kazakhstan due to pressure on the Russian-speaking population: “I am tired of the situation in Kazakhstan, that Russians are being squeezed.” This indicates that the informants experienced a sense of discrimination or unequal treatment, which, in turn, may foster an atmosphere of hostility and alienation. Recalling how they were told, “Go back to your homeland, to Russia,” one respondent explained that this contributed to an increasing desire to leave the country.

Another issue faced by students studying in Kazakhstan concerns financial matters. Firstly, it was mentioned that education in Kazakhstan is expensive and state-funded places are scarcely available. This imposes a significant financial burden on families: “...the education in our country did not suit

me... it is much more expensive." Secondly, extortion was mentioned several times: "...there is a lot of corruption in Kazakhstan." This undermined trust in educational institutions: "I knew from the beginning that I would apply to Russia because I do not really trust our educational system." Students expect that studying abroad will provide them with deeper and more practical knowledge: "...I was counting on getting more knowledge at Tomsk State University than in Kazakhstan." Similarly to students from Kyrgyzstan, Kazakhstani students in Tomsk enrolled in fields of study that are absent in their homeland: "I chose petroleum engineering. I looked at petroleum universities in Kazakhstan: either they do not exist, or they are at a low level."

Personal reasons were mentioned less frequently by Kazakhstani students than by those from Kyrgyzstan and were mainly justified on an emotional basis: "Somehow, this place feels closer, more familiar to me," "I am a Russian person... I love Russia. I am going to get Russian citizenship."

The choice of Tomsk was justified, first, on territorial grounds: "Siberia is the closest to us... I can get there by bus, I do not even have to take a train." Secondly, by the formation of communities of compatriots: "I mostly befriended those guys with whom I am studying here now." The latter helps reduce anxiety and creates a sense of security: "...I will not be alone here... otherwise, I probably would not have gone somewhere really far by myself."

**"Ex providentia maiorum" ("According to the Testament of the Ancestors")**

Parents and other relatives of students from Kyrgyzstan exerted considerable influence on the choice of the place of study. For some, older brothers and sisters had studied in Russia, or even in Tomsk, while others had relatives working there: "Both my aunt and her children studied at Tomsk State University. My cousin, she also studied at TSU. My cousin brother studied at the Polytechnic." Parents of female students often preferred Tomsk, considering it the safest city: "I took entrance exams at two universities... my father did not let me go to the first university... the North Caucasus Federal University... mainly because my father was afraid... that if I went there, I would be immediately stolen into marriage." The position of some parents represented a serious investment in the family's future: "My parents dreamed that I would leave Kyrgyzstan and settle somewhere else to be able to study. Therefore, even despite some financial situation, it is a kind of investment, so to speak, that sooner or later will definitely pay off." There were, however, family dramas when parents were reluctant to let their child go to another country, or grandmothers feared losing their support from a granddaughter.

Some students from Kazakhstan emphasized that their parents experienced stress and anxiety when letting them study abroad: "With some slight worries... my father drilled me until the very end to make sure everything was exactly right, so that I would be admitted." The desire of parents for their child to study not far from home may be connected to cultural and familial values, where proximity to relatives plays an important role in maintaining emotional bonds and providing support: "...my parents did not want me to go far away and wanted me to be relatively close to my home."

There were students who noted that the idea of applying to a Russian university initially did not belong to them but to their parents: “My father always wanted me to go to study in Russia.” Some informants explained that this was related to their parents’ awareness of the shortcomings of the educational system in Kazakhstan and their desire to provide better opportunities for their children: “They also wanted me to enter Russia because they... understood that the education system in Kazakhstan is not so developed.” Some students explained this by emotional factors: “I grew up in a family where Russia was our second homeland.” Thus, the choice to study in Russia was often the result of a family decision.

**“Non scholae, sed vitae discimus” (“We learn not for school, but for life”)**

Schoolteachers in Kyrgyzstan exhibited varying attitudes toward their students’ plans to pursue education in Russia. Occasionally, teachers expressed a preference for students to remain in their homeland and contribute to it; however, more often they were pleased upon learning of their students’ acceptance and even offered assistance: “My homeroom teacher... constantly brought me brochures from various universities.” A noticeable difference emerged between schools attended by the students. In some schools, studying abroad was almost an anomaly: “...in my school... it was uncommon for students to go abroad to study... and when the teachers learned that I had been admitted, they reacted skeptically, saying things like, ‘Are you sure you want to go?’ ... But mostly they were happy... there was a kind of pride that someone from the school was going to study in Russia.” In contrast, studying abroad was a well-established practice in other schools: “Of course, they approved because many graduates of my school study abroad-in Russia, Europe, America... and they are proud of their students who graduated from foreign universities.” It was evident that certain schools in Kyrgyzstan received particular attention from recruiters: “Speakers were invited to us, from Europe, from Russia, and specifically from TSU... but mostly the speakers came from European and American universities.” Students also mentioned that “the government... is against us entering Russian universities... because I was issued my bachelor’s degree documents on September 15, so I was unable to immediately enroll in a master’s program in Russia.”

Interview materials reveal various positions among school administrations in Kazakhstan regarding their graduates’ education in Russia. Some students reported that teachers explicitly discouraged applying to Russian universities, arguing that the students were needed “here”: “...the reaction was negative, of course, ‘don’t do it, why, stay in Kazakhstan... we need you, don’t listen to anyone, stay.’” Others attempted to demotivate students: “They said you will study in Russia but will come back home anyway, because no one is waiting for you in Russia.” Informants emphasized differences in educational and pedagogical approaches between Kazakh-language and Russian-language classes in Kazakhstan’s educational institutions. In Kazakh-language departments, there is a strong emphasis on patriotism and love for the homeland, which may exert pressure on students, compelling them to feel obligated to serve their country’s interests: “...students studying in the Kazakh department, even teachers there encourage patriotism; there is an expectation that everyone is in Kazakhstan, everyone is for the homeland.” In contrast, in Russian-language classes, teachers tend to adopt a

more neutral stance, which may grant students greater freedom in choosing their place of further study: "...I studied in a Russian-language class, and our teachers were also Russian-speaking, mostly ethnic Russians, and they said absolutely nothing negative about this. They fully supported us, both those who entered Russian universities and those who enrolled in universities in Kazakhstan or any other country." Some students spoke of teachers' desire to help their pupils succeed in Russia and to see them become competitive on the international stage: "They were very happy that you would demonstrate your knowledge there, in Russia... the entire teaching staff provided maximum support so that all students from the school could obtain state-funded places." This can be interpreted as a particular mindset held by at least part of the Russian-speaking teaching community in modern Kazakhstan and how they see the future of Russian speakers within the country.

**"Amicus verus cognoscitur amore, more, ore, re" ("A true friend is known by love, conduct, word, and deed")**

The host society was primarily perceived by migrant students through their relationships with fellow students and professors. Ethnic Kyrgyz students noted that their initial reception by the group was based largely on their phenotype and, apparently, certain prevailing stereotypes: "...their first reaction was that I either do not know Russian or speak it poorly." Occasionally, migrant students faced accusations suggesting that they had been admitted through an easier process: "...there were such conversations... that it was easier for us to get admitted than for Russians." The rhetoric also reflected the widely circulated media stereotype of the "newcomers": "...there was the resentment of one girl... that we, not being Russians, came and took the state-funded places, and because of this, she could not enroll." At the same time, assistance from local students was also reported: "They treat me well... Sometimes in computer science they pay more attention to me and help." Overall, after the initial adaptation period, the phrase "It's fine, I get along well with everyone, I do not quarrel with anyone" was commonly expressed. However, in several interviews, it was noted that even Russian respondents from Kyrgyzstan formed warmer relationships with students from the Commonwealth of Independent States (CIS) than with Russians: "...the person who settled us... gathered all the CIS students on the thirteenth floor... we have one mentality. And we calmly respect each other, tolerate certain peculiarities of each other." CIS students, sometimes irrespective of ethnic affiliation, were united by elements of a shared cultural code: attitudes toward parents and elders in general, "who a kelinka (young daughter-in-law) is and what her rights are," "what is considered haram (forbidden, sinful), ... uyad" (shameful), and the incorporation into speech of words and images understood only by them.

The attitude of professors also sometimes depended on entrenched stereotypes: "They judged by appearance and thought I did not know Russian well," said a Kyrgyz female student, while her Russian peer described a situation far from tolerant: "A female professor once said a very unpleasant thing: 'Ah, you came from there, where they still ride horses... they do not teach Russian at all there.'" There were cases when respondents spoke of their marginalization both in their homeland and in Tomsk. A Tatar female student, living in a Russian-speaking family in Kyrgyzstan, did not know

Kyrgyz and faced unpleasant situations because of this. In Tomsk, she was judged by her appearance and also felt like an outsider: “I say that the situation I have in Kyrgyzstan arises here as well.” Although almost none of the respondents reported that professors refused to help when approached: “I like that you can always ask a teacher, and they will answer and explain.” At times, the proactive attitude of professors was highlighted: “On the contrary, they say, ‘If something is unclear, it is better to come and ask now than later.’” One interviewee expressed the friendly atmosphere in classes as follows: “You do not feel ashamed that you might say something wrong now.” Another opinion about the atmosphere in the faculty as a whole was: “We have a very cool dean... he really cares about us, like his own children.” A young man with career aspirations and a perfectionist’s attitude described the situation in these words: “Many note my achievements, speak about a good future... everyone is always willing to help...”

The situation with students from Kazakhstan differs, both among Russian-speaking and ethnic Kazakh students. Kazakhstani informants more frequently noted that among their friends and acquaintances there were both Russians and Kazakhs, and they did not perceive any significant difference between people from the two countries: “...yes, fifty-fifty. I have many close friends and acquaintances who are from Russia and those who are from Kazakhstan... I cannot highlight anyone more or less.” Thus, students often emphasized that there was no bias or preference toward one group or the other within their social circles, and that they regarded their friends as equals regardless of their origin. One informant, an ethnic Kazakh, said: “I cannot distinguish people from Kazakhstan or from Russia because I currently live with a Russian citizen, I get along very well with him, he is, like, my best friend. And with citizens of Kazakhstan, it is also fine. We just have a group... we communicate normally. And we do not divide each other as Russian, Kazakh, or Chechen.” This may also indicate his openness and ability to integrate into different cultural contexts, which is important in conditions of intercultural communication: “...I am quite a communicative person, I can find common ground with many people.”

Ethnic Russians from Kazakhstan also noted their openness and sociability, which facilitated their rapid integration into the new environment: “They all know that people from Kazakhstan are very sociable and are the good-timers.” Overall, students report a positive experience of interaction with local students. They note that local students demonstrate friendliness and openness, which creates a comfortable atmosphere for communication: “Local students treat us normally, in a friendly way. They also greet us, communicate kindly. There is nothing special about it.” The phrase “normally, in a friendly way” indicates that the student does not encounter bias or negative attitudes, which is important for social integration. One respondent remarked that the atmosphere in the group is almost familial: “...we have a wonderful group, I am very glad to study with these people... When someone passes an exam successfully, everyone is happy for that person. If someone struggles, they are supported.”

Of course, negative experiences-such as conflicts and misunderstandings-also occur; however, these were reported much less frequently and were attributed to the individual characteristics of certain

people. For example, difficulties in teamwork with students who were unmotivated to study were mentioned: “It is not that they did not want to be with me specifically; they were simply not interested in studying in general. That is, they do not want to work, and when you end up in a group with them, you have to work alone.” One female student noted that her refusal to participate in group social activities, such as visits to clubs and bars, led to distancing from her groupmates: “...at first, everything was very good... later I just distanced myself from my groupmates and stopped communicating with them... they could invite me to some clubs, some bars. I refused. And I think they got offended by me... sometimes it happens that I just stay alone.”

An interesting fact is that some informants of Russian origin reported experiencing bias from certain Tomsk professors. A teacher might call them “Kazakhs” and even allow himself offensive remarks: “There are some instructors who were biased... there was one instructor... he was prejudiced against students from the Commonwealth of Independent States: ‘You are from Kazakhstan-you are a Kazakh,’ and he called some students from Uzbekistan ‘churkas’ [a derogatory term].” Students spoke about instances of bias and stereotyping. One professor was mentioned as expressing dissatisfaction with their presence in Russia: “...there are nationalists who do not want to help because they are nationalists... ‘Go back to Kazakhstan, study there.’” A female student recalled a case when an instructor displayed overt bias by segregating students into groups according to their nationality. This created an atmosphere of inequality and injustice, where some students received privileges or more favorable conditions, while others faced restrictions: “...some teachers divided us... by nationality, I mean... They openly said: ‘Those from the CIS, sit in this row, and those sit in that row’... At the exam, we were seated like that and then forced to take the exam... We took the exams, but they did not.” Such an approach appears to negatively affect both the educational process and the moral state of students, fostering feelings of isolation and undervaluation.

However, other students noted the objectivity of their i professors’ assessments, emphasizing that during their studies all students were evaluated under equal conditions: “The professors are all objective. I like that they impartially assess the abilities of a person, a student... There is no such thing as someone becoming a disliked or a favorite student.” Even when encountering strict and demanding professors, the expectations were uniformly applied to all members of the group, regardless of nationality or other factors: “There are, of course, instructors who are somewhat stricter overall with all the students. There are instructors who maintain a more relaxed, friendly atmosphere with all the students. That is, no one is singled out,” … “for the most part, they do not care where you are from, who you are, or how you are. The most important thing is that you learn their subject, and that is all.” Students also noted that professors were willing to provide assistance and accommodate students, which fosters a comfortable learning environment: “I have never been refused help; on the contrary, whenever I had questions, I encountered professors who made an effort to meet me halfway and try to help.”

**“Per aspera ad astra” (“Through hardships to the stars”)**

Many undergraduate students attributed their difficulties during the first year of study to weaker secondary education in their home countries. One example of such a challenging path involved a student who had to abandon a natural sciences program and transfer to a humanities faculty: “...in our school, computer science was not taught, but here they already required basic knowledge... Mathematics was difficult... because our teachers kept changing, and some did not teach at all; they just sat around talking about life. ... Chemistry was taught poorly; we mostly just took notes and memorized the Mendeleev table. ... There was basically no equipment for... experiments.” This situation seems to be understood by some teachers even in the country of origin: “Even in Kyrgyzstan, we tried to study using Russian textbooks, not those published in our country. But that was the initiative of our teacher.” This is without mentioning Russian history, which is covered only minimally in Kyrgyz schools. Graduate students noted that their undergraduate preparation at home was weaker compared to the level of their Russian peers.

Similarly, Kazakhstani students also pointed to difficulties in their studies related to weaker secondary education in Kazakhstan: “...as I said earlier, education in Kazakhstan is not very good... there were gaps in knowledge.” Due to insufficient preparation in school, where teaching was not at the proper level, students had to “work hard” - to study diligently and exert additional effort in order not to fall behind their peers: “In the first two years, we had basic knowledge in mathematics and physics... Therefore, I really had to work hard so as not to lag behind all the students. For example, if I did not have a physics teacher at school, the math teacher substituted for physics... of course, knowledge was lacking.” This problem was most often mentioned by students in technical fields. While graduates of Russian schools already had a conceptual understanding of the subject and could engage with it at a deeper level, Kazakhstani students found themselves at a disadvantage: “We [Kazakhstani students], when we just came to descriptive geometry, knew nothing; we did not even know how to hold a pencil in our hands. They [Russians] already understood and looked at the same objects differently, not like us.”

Other challenges faced by students at the beginning of their academic journey included complex scientific texts: “The text itself, which is given to you, is unclear. You read it over and over, and still do not understand anything,” as well as a heavy workload: “I did not expect such a serious workload, and how hard it would be. I barely finished this semester.”

**“Concordia discors” (“Harmony of opposites”)**

It is in the dormitories that students most closely encountered the often very different cultures of one another. We considered the sphere of everyday life as a communicative space influencing students’ adaptation to the host society and, indirectly, their academic performance. Purely domestic inconveniences-such as mold in the shower, cockroaches and bedbugs in the rooms-or, conversely, good conditions in more modern dormitories, where “...the section is clean, there are toilets, a bath... cleaning staff come every few days and clean everything. The study rooms... are equipped

with computers... and there is a gym you can go to"- were distinguished from what could be attributed to cultural differences. For example, Kyrgyz female students experienced discomfort in the communal shower: "...sometimes people just stand and stare at you... it was unpleasant at such moments." However, performing namaz (Islamic prayer) in the room, according to our respondents, never led to conflicts: "One girl was Pamiri; she performed namaz, another girl was Christian... she went to church... and they always treated each other with understanding... when I visited them and it happened to be namaz time, we could quietly sit without any difficulties, and it did not anger us, we just waited and that was it." The practice of namaz is widespread among students from Central Asia, and we cannot guarantee that it never causes disagreements in dormitory rooms.

One Russian-speaking student from Kazakhstan recounted that the main difficulty in communication arose because her roommates "...did not speak Russian very well." She moved to another room. At the same time, another Russian student from Kazakhstan said that she was the only representative of Kazakhstan in her room, which led to feelings of isolation and a lack of mutual understanding with her roommates: "...it happened that I was settled in a room where I was the only one from Kazakhstan. And it was not immediately that we found a common language." However, some students noted that not only did no conflicts arise with dormitory roommates from other countries, but such cohabitation actually helped them adapt more quickly to the new environment and integrate into Russian society: "...they were all Russians... I was very lucky here. Wonderful people, they taught me a lot, explained many things... In the summer, they finished their fourth year and moved out. Now I live with a guy from Russia and two guys from Kazakhstan. And we have excellent interaction, excellent relationships... I would even... call them almost family-like."

**"Ex ore parvulorum veritas" ("Out of the mouths of babes comes truth")**

How do students from Kyrgyzstan perceive the natural and urban environment of Tomsk with a fresh perspective? For most residents of their warm homeland, Tomsk seems very cold, with a limited number of sunny days, yet it delights with its clean air and surrounding forests. To inhabitants of the capital city Bishkek, Tomsk appears small and quiet; to provincials, it seems large and noisy. For all, however, it is considered safe. They are captivated by the architecture of the old stone and wooden buildings and the recreational areas: "The Tomsk State University grove-for me, it was just... mind-blowing, so to speak." Since Kyrgyzstan lacks buildings older than the Soviet constructions of the 1940s and 1950s, youthful imagination relates the realities of Tomsk to literary images of distant countries: "The university amazed me very much... Tomsk State University looks like a castle." For many, the digital services in shops and on public transport were unfamiliar. The large number of various events, including scientific ones, and the information about them in public groups fascinate a great number of young people. What disappoints, however, is the disrespectful attitude of youth toward their elders. This concern is voiced not only by Kyrgyz students but also by ethnic Russians from that country: "I was very surprised... in our city, whenever you get on a bus, young people stand up without any prompting... Here, on buses... sometimes that does not happen... some peers speak very rudely... to teachers or even to their own parents..." Yet some viewed the people of Tomsk from

a different angle: “I liked the people... to me, they were somehow super unusual. Because in my city, they are all Asians and all the same. But here, everyone is Russian, they dress in a cool way and speak nicely and friendly. And that is what I liked the most.”

Students from large cities in Kazakhstan pointed out differences in the public transportation fare payment systems. In their hometowns, payment devices are installed at all doors of buses, which minimizes delays and ensures passenger comfort. In Tomsk, buses are small and often overcrowded, and passengers are forced to hand money directly to the driver, creating inconvenience: “...in Almaty... there are devices, and you just bring your card close, and the payment is made automatically. They are installed at the entrance, the exit, well, at all the doors. Here [in Tomsk], first of all, the buses are always small, they are always full, and you have to personally hand the money to the driver. It even feels a bit unsafe because the driver is constantly distracted to process the payment.”

Moreover, initially, students from large Kazakh cities experienced disappointment and dissatisfaction when comparing their hometowns to Tomsk. For instance, a student from Almaty said that her city is more dynamic, making it difficult to reconcile with the small and quiet Tomsk. However, over time, she adapted: “...I was very upset when I arrived in Tomsk, and I started comparing it to Almaty. That was my mistake... ‘Almaty is so big. I came here. Why?’ But now I got used to it.”

At the same time, informants admired the diversity of architecture and the atmosphere prevailing in the city. They were particularly impressed by the contrast between modern buildings and traditional wooden houses: “...I really liked the wooden houses, I really liked that you walk past a beautiful new building, and opposite it, there are little wooden cottages.” Wooden houses may be associated with the cultural roots of the region and speak to the importance of preserving historical heritage as one of the city’s distinctive features. Students from smaller Kazakh cities emphasized Tomsk’s cleanliness and the variety of cultural and recreational facilities: “...a clean city, many sights, many places where you can spend your leisure time wonderfully.” Similarly to students from Kyrgyzstan, Kazakh students noted the clean and oxygen-rich air: “Constant fresh air, ...rich in oxygen. This is really noticeable if you compare it with Astana, for example. ...when you arrive in Siberia by train..., you immediately feel the difference between Kazakh steppes and Siberian forests.” Students also drew attention to the fact that Tomsk is not only populated by a large number of young people but also by many young people from different countries with diverse perspectives and cultural traditions: “I liked that there are really many students in Tomsk. You can find your own impression in everyone, and everyone has their own life experience.”

**“Omnis comparatio claudicat” (“Every comparison is flawed”)**

Nevertheless, interviews with master’s students who completed their bachelor’s degrees in their home countries and are now studying in master’s programs in Tomsk provided an opportunity to compare certain aspects of the higher education systems in the two countries. Comparisons emerged in at least three areas: the behavior of instructors and students, technical resources, and technological approaches. Respondents noted the higher qualifications of professors at Tomsk

universities: “Here, the professors know more and can explain more clearly...” They emphasized the professors’ demanding nature as a guarantee of the quality of student work: “I really do all the work myself. I know that my diploma is a diploma earned by my own efforts, blood, and then tears.” The dialogic nature of the interaction between students and their mentors was also highlighted: “Students in Kyrgyzstan depended... on the professors. Whatever they were told, they did. Here, students are a bit more demanding of instructors and the faculty, like: ‘Make the schedule in the evening’ and ‘Please change the professor because she knows too little,’ ... they ask a lot of questions. ... If they... do not like the subject, they say directly: ‘I did not like your subject,’ or ‘You gave us a good lecture,’ [whereas in Kyrgyzstan] we kept silent if we disagreed with professors... it was strict. We could not say...”

Respondents naturally drew attention to the technical equipment available at Tomsk universities: “In our department, we use geodetic instruments. But in Kyrgyzstan… we did not have them. They were old and were just shown to us, but we did not use them.” The effectiveness and self-esteem of master’s students increased due to working with good modern equipment: “...I do not think that if I had studied in Kyrgyzstan, there would have been any licensed software, for example. We did projects in Project Expert-yes, there was a limited number of licenses, but they existed, and we did the work. Sometimes, of course, two of us shared a license or took turns, but it was there.”

Respondents also noted the more rapid transition to online technologies during the COVID-19 pandemic and the methodological imprint that this process left behind: “Electronic universities during COVID were raised quite quickly... In Kyrgyzstan, they did not adapt so fast... this remote format left such a good mark in terms of developing all these courses.” Financial support for master’s students can also be considered part of the technological approach to addressing pedagogical challenges. In Kyrgyzstan, the scholarship amounts to 800–1000 soms, approximately 1200 rubles, and it is awarded only to top-performing students. “Here, upon arrival, every month they already give a scholarship of 3000–3200. This is if your diploma work is graded ‘four’. I have a classmate who graduated with a ‘five’... he will receive... twice as much as us.”

However, some master’s students expressed dissatisfaction with the restricted access to universities: “Here, my acquaintances or my sister cannot enter the university because she does not have a pass. But in Kyrgyzstan, my parents, relatives could enter the university and communicate with professors... our parents... will not calm down... they ask the professor, how is my daughter... how is her academic performance?” For them, societal security lies in the cohesion of families; for us, it lies in barriers at the university entrance.

**“Futura sunt in manibus deorum” (“The future is in the hands of the gods”)**

“The future is in the hands of the gods,” yet bachelor’s and master’s students have their own reflections on this matter. When contemplating the future, they tend to fall into two categories. Nomads plan to continue their educational peregrinations across cities and towns. A Kyrgyz female student said, “I was thinking about Canada, or East Asia: South Korea, China.” A Russian female student

remarked, "...or, if I try really hard, somewhere in Europe." Those who are less mobile or less ambitious intend to establish new roots in Russia: "...to apply for a residence permit... to realize myself in Russia." This is usually explained by the fact that "...there are many more opportunities here. And there is something to strive for." A Kyrgyz respondent stated, "I am more inclined to stay in Russia... I already know where I can go to work... I am absolutely sure that I can somehow adapt."

At the same time, the factor of kinship is evident: they plan to move from Tomsk closer to relatives if they live in other regions, "to bring [from Kyrgyzstan] ... my mother, ... all my close ones here." This concern is echoed by another Russian respondent: "Without this safety cushion, precisely without relatives nearby, it is very difficult. I understood this over four years." The same call of kinship, compounded by cultural distance, was expressed by a female representative of the indigenous ethnic group of Kyrgyzstan: "I will finish my studies and leave... I want to go back to my homeland. There are my relatives, family, friends. And there I feel free. But here I feel lonely. [The reason is] probably related to the language."

When the conversation turned to possible reasons for returning home, young men sometimes linked it to the special military operation: "...it is unsafe in this regard." There was also a reaction to the sanction's regime: "...when I return to Kyrgyzstan for the summer, I again have full access to all sorts of resources and everything. It just blows my mind." A similar opinion was expressed by another respondent: "...from Russia, you cannot even travel anywhere except to CIS countries. But from Kyrgyzstan... you can travel all over the world."

Interestingly, factors pushing Russian students, both from Russia and Kyrgyzstan to leave were also mentioned. In the former case, the uncertainty concerned securing housing and obtaining Russian citizenship: "...without citizenship or at least without registration, it will be difficult to live here. If this is not resolved, then it's straight back home." In the latter case, the issue was cultural conflict in Kyrgyzstan: "...we have very strong racism. I can admit that, actually... even if you find a job, you might not be hired because of your nationality."

Kazakhstani students, when discussing their future plans, divided into two main groups. The first group consists of those who wish to remain in Russia for further development and life in general: "To stay in Russia, I want to continue my studies here, in the master's program, I really want to find myself here." Among them, some students plan to continue their education and career in Tomsk: "For now, the only option I see is to stay here at Tomsk Polytechnic University. To study in the master's program and work here at TPU." Others intend to pursue their studies and seek employment in larger cities: "...I am also considering Novosibirsk and St. Petersburg." The second direction where students plan to go after completing their bachelor's degrees is European countries: "...I really want to go to European countries. For example, Germany, Italy, France... I want to study abroad to pursue a master's degree."

Returning to their homeland was not considered by the majority of Kazakhstani students. Some expressed very categorical opinions on this matter: "I do not consider it at all. And I have never

considered [returning to Kazakhstan]." This may indicate adaptation to the new environment, that the individual has found themselves in the new culture and society. The unwillingness to return may also reflect certain disappointments experienced in the home country, which strengthens their desire to remain in Russia. Feelings toward the homeland have changed, and they no longer feel "at home" there: "...I am not drawn there... I do not want to go there because it is simply no longer familiar. The familiar is Russia." However, some admitted the possibility of returning due to attachment to family: "...family, parents, grandparents, and all. Otherwise, nothing else holds me anywhere." Several students also referred to instability in Russia related to the special military operation: "...I will leave [for Kazakhstan] if the war situation escalates." The importance of financial considerations in making the decision about the country of residence was also mentioned: "It all depends entirely on the salary [when choosing a country]."

**"Verba volant, scripta manent" ("Spoken words fly away, written words remain")**

Conversations with students from Kyrgyzstan and Kazakhstan allowed us to identify the reasons that brought them to Russian universities and, subsequently, through a cascade of challenges in academic and everyday life, influenced their plans for post-academic life. This information emerged against the backdrop of the particular socio-political and economic situation of the early 2020s of the twenty-first century.

The interview materials reveal the inner world of migrant students, testify to the social trauma of migration experienced by some of them, and reflect their aspiration to resolve this issue through socialization within the host society. For representatives of the latter, these materials may serve as a foundation for empathy toward those who have come to study from Kyrgyzstan and Kazakhstan.

While not generalizing the opinions of our interlocutors to all students from these two countries studying in Russia, we nevertheless recorded many of the life situation assessments present within this environment. Their perspectives constitute an integral part of the social consciousness of this cohort of youth.

However, there is another issue that should not remain outside the scope of this text. In seeking respondents, we encountered refusals from university representatives to provide the names and phone numbers of potential interviewees and attempts to reach them through social networks and other public platforms proved unsuccessful. Many declined participation in the interviews, evasively citing busyness. It was palpable that the students were cautious, fearing that conversations recorded on a voice recorder might cause troubles. Only a few years ago, respondents were much more accessible. We found a way forward through so-called "warm contacts" – initially through acquaintances, and then our interlocutors, realizing that the interview topic was not only free of concerns but also quite interesting, provided us with further contacts. Naturally, this narrowed the pool of possible respondents and led to changes in the categorical composition we had planned. All of this also reflects the spirit of the era, when already fragile trust between people has become even more

tenuous. Nevertheless, there were many to whom we are deeply grateful for their sincere and detailed responses.

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