



SOUTH KOREA'S IMMIGRATION POLICY AND THE END OF DEMOGRAPHIC ISOLATIONISM

South Korea is an outlier among high-income countries in terms the share of immigrants in the population. According to the UN Population Division statistics, immigrants made only 2.3% of the population of the Republic of Korea in 2019, which is nowhere near as much as other developed countries have (14%). For decades of thriving economy, South Korea has pursued a very stringent and conservative immigration policy. However, over the past several years, there has been a gradual change in the policy of the South Korean government towards immigration.

The Republic of Korea has gradually started to take the "left turn" in its immigration policy in the 2000s. In 2019, the size of migrant population in the country amounted to 1.163.655 which is a 26% increase since 2010 (919.987 people) and nearly 4.8-fold increase compared to 2000 (244.224 people). In percentage terms from the total population of (51.829.023), the migrant population in South Korea increased from 0.5% in 2000 to 2.3% in 2019, which is still very small immigration compared to other developed nations. Even the worldwide average share of immigrants (3.5%) higher than it is in South Korea (2.3%). Nevertheless, the immigration in South Korea has lately become a source of concern and anxiety. The only other example of a similarly small migrant stock among major developed nations is Japan, where migrants make only 2% of the population. Unlike other high-income countries that in general have been rather liberal to varying degrees towards immigration, South Korea has reluctantly started to change their immigration policy since recently. For decades of strong economic growth over the course of the second half of the 20th century South Korea has followed its well-established approach in regarding the immigration policy. South Korea's strict and well-controlled immigration policy was often presented among developed economies as an extreme, and yet successful example on the migration policy spectrum. However, the failure of this kind of immigration policy has become evident in light of undeniable demographic factors and globalization trends.

Public opinion among South Koreans remains negative towards strangers in general, including even refugees. For instance, public discontent about the group of 550 asylum-seekers from Yemen in June, 2018 sparked protests and a wave of xenophobia. A petition against accepting refugees was signed by 700 thousand people right afterwards, which became a clear manifestation of a negative attitude towards strangers in the Korean society. The government of South Korea eventually had to deny some of the refugee claims in spite of its international commitments. A recent survey showed that South Koreans generally do not support the idea of letting immigrants in the country. At the same time, the degree of sympathy towards immigrants depended very much on their ethnic identity. 19.46% of the respondents supported encouraging ethnic Koreans to immigrate to South Korea. For Europeans this percentage was 16.58%, 8.72% - for Southeast Asians, 8.61% - for Africans and 5.93% for Middle Easterners. On the other hand, apart from objective demographic decline, there is a significant political force backed by small businesses lobbying immigration of to cover demand for low-skilled labor that among Koreans are in short supply. Moreover, the actions of the government of South Korea to facilitate the process of immigration face strong opposition from the society. Therefore, openly launching immigration programs, the government of South Korea removes some of the restrictions for employers tacitly allowing them to hire foreigners, facilitates the extension of visas, introduces different visa types etc.

The immigration is not an issue all by itself for South Korea. The problem stems from the fact that South Korea has been highly conservative in relation to immigration for an extended period of time practically disregarding global trends. For decades, developed western economies took largely liberal stance elaborating different policy tools to adjust immigration to their economic growth models with varying success. For instance, during the 1990s the average immigrant population share in European countries were between 7.5-9.3%, in North America it was

at 9.9-12.9%, while in Australia immigrants constituted almost a quarter (23%) of the population. The influx of immigrants to these developed countries increased further since then. Liberal immigration policies that many western countries practice is a very complex process that transforms practically every sphere of life and it takes decades to calibrate the process, so that it could function efficiently. Throughout a long period of constant immigration, western countries have accumulated a weighty experience of adapting and reaping economic and demographic benefits from immigrants. This is not the case with South Korea, which was practically closed to immigrants before some 15-20 years ago. Although South Korea is fully capable of creating necessary conditions for efficient immigrant adaptation in technical terms, it will take a large amount of time and resources to change the public perception and cultural attitudes towards immigration in the Korean society.

In the meantime, South Korea is increasingly being hit hard by its demographic plunge. Recently, South Korea's total fertility rate dropped to 0.84, which is the lowest of any country in the world. The official statistics, released in January, 2021, has shown the first year-to year total population decline by almost 21 thousand people over the previous ten years. As a result, South Korea has the third smallest percentage of children aged under 14 (12.9%) after Japan (12.6%) and Singapore (12.3%). The measures taken by the government to stimulate natural population growth do not seem to be effective, leaving no options other than immigration.

By turning to immigration, South Korea basically admits the failure of its policy of demographic isolationism that it has historically adhered to. The government of South Korea appears to be caught between a rock and a hard place as it tries to balance between traditional sentiments of the Korean society, business interests and the objective reality. Consequently, we can expect the immigration to be a source of tension in South Korea, which would also affect its relations and cooperation with migrant source countries.

Politics, Foreign Affairs, and Security

- The Chair of the Majilis Nurlan Nigmatulin had an online meeting with the Chairman of the Standing Committee of the National People's Congress of China Li Zhanshu. The parties discussed issues of comprehensive cooperation with focus on digital agenda. They agreed to strengthen inter-parliamentary interaction to implement achieved bilateral agreements. The politicians noted that 2021 is an important year for both countries, as they would celebrate 30th anniversary of Kazakhstan's Independence and the 100th anniversary of the Communist Party of China (Kazinform, 18.03.2021).
- Minister of Foreign Affairs of Kyrgyzstan Ruslan Kazakbaev had an online meeting with his Turkmen counterpart Rashid Meredov. The Ministers discussed issues of political and economic cooperation. They mentioned the importance of implementation of joint projects with focus on the construction industry. Energy supply from Turkmenistan to Kyrgyzstan was one of the most important issues in these talks. The parties agreed to strengthen cooperation at the highest level and to start preparations for the fifth meeting of the Kyrgyz-Turkmen Intergovernmental Commission (Kabar.kg, 18.03.2021).
- The US Secretary of State for Political Affairs David Hale held an online trilateral meeting with the Minister of Foreign Affairs of Tajikistan Sirojiddin Muhriddin and the Minister of Foreign Affairs of Afghanistan Mohammed Haneef Atmar. The sides discussed issues of regional cooperation in the fields of politics, security, trade, transportation, energy, and human resources. The Tajik and Afghan sides expressed their eagerness for increased economic engagement, as well as promoting peace and greater connectivity in Central Asia (Asiaplustj.info, 18.03.2021).
- The Minister of Foreign Affairs of Turkey Mevlut Cavusoglu has met with his Iranian counterpart Javad Zarif in Istanbul. During the meeting, the sides reiterated their commitment to fight against all sorts of terrorism, especially PKK/YPG and respecting Syria's territorial integrity. The Ministers also evaluated steps to develop bilateral economic cooperation. The Iranian Minister Zarif said his trip to Istanbul for talks with Cavusoglu was "productive" (Aa.com.tr, 18.03.2021).
- Moscow hosted a meeting on settlement in Afghanistan with participation of Russia, the U.S., China, Turkey, Pakistan, Qatar, Afghanistan and representatives of Taliban. Following the meeting, a statement was adopted in which the participants called on all conflicting parties in Afghanistan to reduce the level of violence in the country and create conditions for reaching a political settlement through negotiations. The meeting participants also called for providing economic support to Afghanistan (Korrespondent.net, 18.03.2021).
- The Ministers of Foreign Affairs of Armenia, Belarus, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Russia, Tajikistan, Turkmenistan and Uzbekistan adopted a joint statement on the role of international law. The document calls for cooperation within the CIS to strengthen the current system of the treaties on disarmament, non-proliferation and arms control. The document is meant to ensure the stability of international relations and reaffirm the importance of the principle of non-interference in the internal affairs of sovereign states (Belta.by, 19.03.2021).

Economy, Finance, and Energy

- Oil service companies from Kazakhstan plan to expand their activity and enter foreign markets. Primarily, they focus on Russia and Azerbaijan. They currently negotiate several important contracts. According to the Chairman of the Presidium of the Association of Oil Service Companies of Kazakhstan Rashid Zhaksylykov, demand for specialists from Kazakhstan is high and around 10 thousand of them work abroad. More expensive contracts and higher wages attract personnel from Kazakhstan (Qazaq TV, 18.03.2021).
- Recently, the Bank of Russia made a decision to increase its key rate by 0.25 percentage points to 4.5% per annum. The regulator did not increase the rate since December 2018. This decision is explained by higher than expected consumer prices in the first quarter of 2021. Stable recovery of domestic demand also contributed to this step. At the same time, external demand is also improving due to fiscal measures in many countries (Tass.com 19.03.2021).
- The President of Uzbekistan Shavkat Mirziyoyev received the General Director of the Lukoil company Vagit Alekperov. During the meeting, Alekperov announced the company's plans to increase investments in Uzbekistan within the second investment cycle, which would amount to \$2 billion. The funds aim to stabilize gas production at the fields in South Gissar and the Kandym group. Lukoil's total investments in Uzbekistan exceeded \$10 billion. The parties agreed to expand strategic cooperation by developing new gas fields (Uzreport.news, 17.03.2021).
- The United States Agency for International Development continues to provide financial assistance to Kyrgyzstan. According to its recent decision, the agency will allocate \$15 million to increase competitiveness of agricultural enterprises of Kyrgyzstan and to intensify their trade with neighboring Uzbekistan. The funds will be distributed among southern regions of the country. The project will be conducted until 2025. It aims to create inclusive jobs, expand border and regional trade, and strengthen trade integration between Kyrgyzstan and Uzbekistan (24.kg, 18.03.2021).
- According to the Minister of Digital Transformation of Ukraine Mykhailo Fedorov, the country plans to significantly transform its IT sector. Fedorov mentioned that by 2024 the number of IT professionals would reach 500 thousand. Their current number is 220-230 thousand. It is expected that the revenues of the sector would surge from current \$6.5 billion to \$16 billion. Increase of the number of IT professionals is one of priorities identified in the National Economic Strategy until 2030 (Ukrinform.net, 19.03.2021).
- Representatives from the United States Agency for International Development supported Uzbekistan with the opening of a Modern Communications Room at the Ministry of Innovative Development. This room is crucial for Uzbek authorities to modernize the country's energy sector. Uzbekistan set ambitious goals in terms of renewable energy development. By 2030, it plans to increase the share of renewables to 25% of the energy mix and to commission 5,000 megawatts of new solar capacity and 3,000 megawatts in wind power plants (Kun.uz, 16.03.2021).

Society and Culture

- Diplomats of Azerbaijan, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Uzbekistan and Turkey attended the celebration of Nauryz festive day in Baku. The national cuisine and different symbols reflecting the history and culture of the Turkic-speaking states were presented at the event. It was followed by demonstrations of national costumes of member and observer countries accompanied by national music (Astanatimes.com, 18.03.2021).
- On the eve of the Nauryz festive, the President of the International Turkic Academy Darkhan Kydyrali held a meeting with the heads and representatives of Kazakh mass media. The head of the Academy told about the media about the work of the organization and the schedule of important events to be held this year. Some of the media leaders and representatives were presented with special awards and letters of recognition for their contribution to the coverage of news of the Turkic World (Twesco.org, 20.03.2021).
- The Chinese side has sent 150 thousand doses of Sinopharm vaccine against COVID-19 to Kyrgyzstan. The Prime Minister Ulukbek Maripov and other representatives of the government took part in receiving humanitarian aid from China. The head of the Kyrgyz government expressed gratitude to China for its help and pointed out the success that China has achieved in the development of an antiviral vaccine (Centralasia.news, 20.03.2021).
- The government of Turkmenistan organized an online meeting entitled "The Role of Women in Strengthening Peace, Trust and Security" with the assistance of the OSCE. The meeting was attended by Turkmen delegation, high-ranking officials of the OSCE, as well as parliamentarians from foreign countries and international organizations. The parties signed a recommendatory document outlining the objectives and actions necessary for the advancement of policies in the field of gender equality and sustainable development (Centralasia.news, 17.03.2021).
- A group of American experts on monitoring the safe operation of hydraulic structures arrived in Uzbekistan within the framework of agreements reached with the United States Army Corps of Engineers (USACE) and the Uzbek government. The experts jointly with representatives of the Ministry of Water Resources of Uzbekistan will inspect the Gissarak and Tupalang dams. Based on the results, the group will develop models of possible failures as well as recommendations for technical monitoring and improving the safety level of dams (Yuz.uz, 16.03.2021).
- Uzbekistan offered Kazakhstan to jointly engage in landscaping and restoration of the ecological environment of the Aral Sea. This initiative was put forward by Doctor of Agricultural Sciences, Academician Zinovy Novitsky. The plan includes development of a unified system of Uzbekistan and Kazakhstan for the restoration of the drained bottom for making it suitable for agriculture. The restoration work is planned to be completed in 5-7 years (Fergana.agency, 19.03.2021).