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

South Korea is an outlier among high-income countries in terms of 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 an economic and social priority. 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 refugees 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 subjective demographic decline, there is an evident 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 was 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 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 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 (12.5%). 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.
• The Chair of the Majlis of Nurali Nigmatulin has met with the Chairman of the Standing Committee of the National People’s Congress of China Li Zhanshu. The sides discussed issues of comprehensive cooperation with focus on digital agenda. They agreed to strengthen inter-parliamentary interaction and 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 preparation work for the next meeting of the Kyrgyz-Turkmen Intergovernmental Commission (Kabar.kg, 18.03.2021).

• The United States Agency for International Development continues to provide financial assistance to Kyrgyzstan. According to the acting head of the agency, the allocation will support $15 million to increase competitiveness of agricultural enterprises of Kyrgyzstan and to stabilize 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 Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Armenia, Belarus, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Russia, Tajikistan, Turkmenistan and Uzbekistan, adopted 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 a new level 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).

• Diplomats of Azerbaijan, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Turkey, and Uzbekistan congratulated 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 (Tweexo.org, 20.03.2021).

• The Chinese side has sent 150 thousand doses of Sinopharm vaccine against COVID-19 to Kyrgyzstan. The Prime Minister Uuluubek Matiyosov, another representative 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 anti-viral 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 recom mendatory 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 Ministry of Energy and Water Resources of Uzbekistan. The experts jointly with representatives of the Ministry of Water Resources of Uzbekistan will inspect the Gissarak and Tu bab dams. Based on the results, the group will develop models of possible failures as well as recommendations for technical leaders and representatives of 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 green corridor of Uzbekistan and Kazakhstan for the restoration of the drained bottom for making it suitable for agricultural work. The work is planned to be completed in 5-7 years (Fergana.agency, 19.03.2021).