YOUNG POPULATION AND HIGH POPULATION GROWTH RATES

POLICY BRIEF
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The Kyrgyz Republic is a small mountainous country located in Central Asia. The National Statistical Committee estimates that its population in early 2020 was 6.5 million. This estimate corresponds to a position of Kyrgyzstan in the middle of the UN list, consisting of more than 200 states: next to Nicaragua and El Salvador. The population here exceeds that of developed countries such as Denmark (5.8 million), Finland (5.5 million), Norway (5.4 million) and the three Baltic countries combined (5.9 million). But unlike these and many other countries in the world, the population of modern Kyrgyzstan is growing rapidly, which exceeds 2%. Kyrgyzstan is among the fastest growing countries in Asia, after Afghanistan, Tajikistan, Iraq, Pakistan and Yemen.

Such high population growth rates in Kyrgyzstan in the late 2010s were somewhat unexpected. It was significantly higher than in the previous two decades and actually meant a return to the mid-1980s. (Fig. 1). In the past, Kyrgyzstan’s population grew most rapidly in the 1960s, when the country was among the world leaders in terms of population growth and experienced a real demographic explosion. The subsequent slowdown was interrupted by the active demographic policy pursued by the Soviet government in the 1980s. The transition to market-based economic conditions and fundamental social transformations after independence were accompanied by strong economic shocks in 1992-1994 and 1998, which corresponded to a significant decline in population growth rates. Moreover, 1993 was the only year in the post-war period when the country’s population even declined due to migration outflows. But since the second half of the 2000s, demographic growth has been recovering rapidly, reaching the level of the last Soviet decade in the 2010s. In total, despite all the difficulties of the transition period, the population of the Republic has increased by 45% or more than 2 million since independence.

Today’s high growth rates are explained by high fertility and low mortality, as well as the relatively insignificant contribution of migration to changes in the population of recent years (Fig. 2). Fluctuations in the overall fertility rate have become the main cause of uneven demographic growth throughout the post-Soviet period. From 1992 to 2000, its value decreased by a third from 29‰ to about 20‰. Subsequently, the overall coefficient began to increase gradually and after 2014, approaching 28 ‰, it almost stabilized.
Figure 1. Population growth of Kyrgyzstan by periods, 1950-2020.
Note: calculated based on the data of the National Statistics Committee of Kyrgyzstan
The range of variation in the overall mortality rate was small: from 8.2% in 1994 to 5.2% in 2019. The role of migration in the demographic dynamics was especially significant right after the declaration of sovereignty. According to the estimates of the National Statistical Committee of the Kyrgyz Republic in total 3.6 million children were born, slightly less than 1 million people died, and 0.6 million people emigrated from the country, during the years of independence.
High fertility

The total number of births, as well as the total fertility rate, changes as a result of the two components. Firstly, the intensity of the childbearing process, the integral measure of which is the total fertility rate. Secondly, fundamental changes in the age and/or other composition of the population, if they occur. The total fertility rate shows how many children one woman would have given birth to during her lifetime, on average, in case the fertility rate of each age remained the same in the year for which the rate is calculated. Until the 1990s, the cumulative coefficient was the average of the coefficient values for two different reproductive populations. The Kyrgyz and other indigenous peoples of Central Asia had high fertility rates. For example, in 1970, the total Kyrgyz coefficient was close to 8 births per woman. This extremely high indicator by international standards indicated that the indigenous peoples were at the very beginning of the demographic transition. The Russians and other non-indigenous peoples of the Republic were in the process of completing their transition to low birth rates. The total fertility rate (2.2 births per woman) among Russian women was 3.5 times lower than among Kyrgyz women. In the last two decades before the collapse of the Soviet Union, the total fertility rate in Kyrgyzstan decreased, mainly due to the Kyrgyz and Uzbeks, while for Russians it was around 2 births per woman.

During the first post-Soviet crisis decade, the total coefficient decreased significantly among all nations (Figure 3). However, the dynamics of this coefficient in the republic as a whole was determined not only by such consequences of the crisis as postponed births and marriages, but also by the transformation of the ethnic composition. The birth rate in the country has not decreased so much as a result of the mass migration from Kyrgyzstan of Russians, Ukrainians, Germans and other nationalities with low birth rates. Because of the small number of non-indigenous peoples in modern Kyrgyzstan, the current birth rate is that of Kyrgyz and Uzbeks. As a result of substitution of the Russian-speaking population in the cities by migrants from rural areas, the difference in the birth rate between urban and rural areas has practically erased, and the differentiation between the regions of the country has decreased. Thus, at the end of the 1990s, the total birth rate in Bishkek was 1.2, and in Naryn Province it was 3.8. In 2018, the total fertility rates in these places were 3.1 and 3.4 births per woman, respectively.

The total fertility rate in Kyrgyzstan has been growing steadily since early 2001, when it was 2.4. By 2018 it had risen to 3.28 births per woman. This has been partly due to the persistence of the model of universal marriage, the realization of marriages and births postponed during crisis periods, and the continuing outflow of migrants with underage reproductive units. Today, Kyrgyzstan has the highest total fertility rate in the world. In Asia, it lags behind Afghanistan, Iraq, Pakistan and Yemen and stands at the same level as Israel. Only African countries have higher rates.
Figure 3. Total fertility rates 1958-2018. (births per woman)
Nevertheless, a decline in fertility should be expected in the future, due to the long-term trend towards low fertility that was set many years ago. Thus, the current birth rate in Kyrgyzstan is lower than that observed in recent Soviet years (4.8 births per woman) and even more so during the peak period at the turn of 1960-1970s. (7,8). If we take into account the general level of development in Kyrgyzstan, including the levels of women’s education and their involvement in social production, the birth rate in the country should be lower. With the value of the Human Development Index for 2019, which is calculated for Kyrgyzstan, the total coefficient should be approximately 2.5 births per woman. It can be expected that in the near future the country’s fertility rate will reach this level, because, as demographic calculations show, the total number of children in the younger and more educated generations of modern women is unlikely to exceed 2.5-2.8 children per woman.

Changes in the birth rate in the last quarter of the century were accompanied by a significant increase in the prevalence of contraception and a decrease in the frequency of abortion through induced abortion. The huge achievement of the country is that modern, instrumental means of pregnancy prevention gradually replace traditional and ineffective methods in the structure of used contraception. Nevertheless, the problem of meeting the need for contraception remains unsolved. If by 2015 the need for contraception was partially covered by humanitarian supplies, today the Republic is moving to purely market-based mechanisms of contraception distribution, which can seriously complicate the situation and worsen the structure of used contraception, taking into account the low level of income of the population.

Another reason for concern is the fact that the modern model of family formation in the Kyrgyz Republic implies the birth of the desired number of children with minimum regulation of birth spacing. As a result, the proportion of children born with an interval of less than 36 months after previous births is not decreasing, more than that, it is even slightly increasing, which threatens the health of mother and child. However, progress in addressing the specific reproductive health needs of the population cannot be questioned. Kyrgyz legislation on family planning and the protection of reproductive rights is undoubtedly one of the most progressive and comprehensive in the modern world. However, the practical safeguarding of reproductive rights remains an important objective of the State policy.
Mortality – overcoming the legacy of the past

An outstanding economist, Nobel laureate Amartya Sen noted that mortality indicators serve as a measure of our economic successes and failures. The dynamics of the integral indicator of mortality — life expectancy at birth — in Kyrgyzstan, as in other former republics of the Soviet Union, was extremely contradictory. From the end of 1920 to the beginning of 1960s it doubled (from about 30 to 60 years for both sexes), infant mortality decreased by 3 times. As a result, Kyrgyzstan has taken an intermediate place between developed and developing countries in the world in terms of life expectancy, taking a position ahead of China, Turkey, South Korea, and Malaysia. During the years of stagnation from the end of the 1960s to the middle of the 1980s, life expectancy in the republics of USSR was not growing or even decreasing: new methods of diagnostic and treatment technologies as well as standards of self-preservative behavior were
having been introduced very slowly. Recent positive changes in mortality are associated with Gorbachev’s anti-alcohol campaign. After the collapse of the USSR mortality rates in Kyrgyzstan, as in other newly independent states, have deteriorated (Figure 4).

Since 2006, the mortality rate in Kyrgyzstan has been rapidly declining, due to overcoming the social and economic consequences of the transition period. Until 2018 life expectancy at birth has increased by 3.9 years for men and 3.5 years for women. Mortality rates have declined in all age groups, but particularly notable success has been in reducing infant and child mortality (by more than half to 14.8%). The maternal mortality rate in Kyrgyzstan also decreased, but remained higher than in other Central Asian republics (about 30 per 100,000 births). However, that is linked not only to the actual level of mortality among women, but also to the joint efforts of specialists of the Ministry of Health and the National Statistical Committee to fully record those cases.

Among all health reform programs that have been adopted in the Kyrgyz Republic, maternal and child health issues have always been a priority.

Despite the progress in recent years, the situation with mortality in Kyrgyzstan, as in other newly independent states, remains unfavorable on the international scale. In 2018, Kyrgyz men were ranked 135th among the 200 countries in the world by life expectancy at birth, close to Russia, India, the Philippines and Ukraine. Women’s indicator was around the same position in the ranking near Vietnam, the Philippines and Egypt, ahead of India but behind Russia and Ukraine. Comparatively high mortality is one of the main problems in the demographic development of the country. Its direct result is the untimely loss of human lives and human capital consequently.

The problems inherited from the Soviet era are the specific features of mortality in Kyrgyzstan, as in other CIS states. They are:

(1) **increased mortality** (excess mortality) in working age, especially in men. Thus, the mortality rate for men aged 35-39 is about 5 times higher than in Japan.

(2) The large gap in life expectancy between men and women, which is 8.2 years. This gap constitutes 6 years in Japan and 5 years in Turkey.

(3) a **high mortality rate from diseases of the cardiovascular and circulatory system** (the contribution to the overall mortality is more than 50%, in Japan and South Korea this number is less than 25%). In Kyrgyzstan, as in other CIS countries, the so-called “cardiovascular revolution” or revolution in the treatment of cardiovascular diseases, is happening with a delay, whereas in the countries with high life expectancy it took place in the 1970s and 1980s.

(4) **significant territorial differentiation in mortality.** In Bishkek, life expectancy for both sexes in 2018 is almost six years higher than in Naryn province. In fact, the difference is greater, as the infant mortality rate in Bishkek, where the national obstetric institutions are located, is overestimated due to the peculiarities of the accounting of infant mortality.
(5) Underdeveloped self-preservative behavior, which is expressed in high mortality rates from causes directly related to human actions and the social environment. Thus, the mortality rate from external causes (poisoning, trauma, violent deaths, etc.) in Kyrgyzstan is more than twice as high as in Japan or Germany. In 2015, the mortality rate from tuberculosis was 18 and 46 (!) times higher than in these countries respectively. Almost half of men aged 15 years and older in Kyrgyzstan smoke. In turn, the WHO estimates that half of these smokers are at risk of premature death.

The eradication of the specific features described above, together with infant and maternal mortality, sets out the main directions of life extension policies. These policies should be comprehensive and not limited to health policies alone. Numerous studies show that there is a close correlation between high mortality, on the one hand, deprivation and inequality, on the other. Therefore, economic growth and poverty reduction are the main prerequisites for reducing mortality.

Age composition and demographic dividend

The high birth rate defines the main feature of the Kyrgyz population - its youthfulness, which is clearly reflected in the age-gender pyramid (Figure 5). If we turn to the three main age contingents with limits recognized by modern international comparisons and considering the changes taking place on the labor market and in the education system, then in terms of the share of children from birth to 19 years inclusively, Kyrgyzstan occupies high position in international ranking, similar to its position according to the birth rate. Kyrgyzstan is at a stage of demographic transition from an agrarian society with high fertility and mortality rates to an industrial society with low fertility and mortality rates, when mortality rates have already declined and fertility rates continue to decline. In the long term, this process will result in a decrease in the number of young dependents, which must be supported. At the same time, their larger number of older siblings, fathers and mothers will add to the working-age population. From an economic point of view, the composition of the population is gradually being optimized: the labor force will, for some time, increase faster than the dependent population groups (children and the elderly). As a result, resources will be freed up to invest in economic development and social security of families. Having equality in other related components, per capita income can increase. Thus, as a result of demographic changes, the conditions for receiving the so-called first demographic dividend will be created.

Demographic projections show that the number of persons of working age and their share of the population will increase in the coming decades as a result of a gradual decline in fertility. But this trend will be implemented in a wavy form, which is connected to deformations in the age structure resulted from the consequences of the Second World War and increased fertility decline in the 1990s. The demographic support coefficient will change in a similar way, indicating the share of people in dependent age per 100 employed people (Figure 6).
One of the main objectives of social and demographic policy is to create the conditions for receiving the first dividend, including: employment of a growing number of people of working age, modern education for young people, improvement of workers' health, and development of financial institutions to provide services for this dividend. Part of the first demographic dividend can be used to prepare for future problems caused by further changes in the age structure - demographic ageing - and to create conditions for receiving the second dividend in the future. Persons in older working age who are facing a longer retirement period have a strong incentive to accumulate assets unless they are confident that their needs will be met by their family or the government. And these assets become a powerful source of investment. Reducing old-age mortality becomes an important prerequisite for a second dividend, since retirement life expectancy depends on it.
Demographic ageing - the main demographic transformation in low-fertility countries - will not manifest itself soon in Kyrgyzstan. The share of people aged 65 years and over in the country is less than 5%. For example: in Japan this level of aging was observed in 1950, in Western and Northern Europe - even earlier in the 19th century. But this does not mean that the challenges of ageing should be ignored. The policy challenge is to painlessly adapt the social institutions that were formed during the period of demographic youth to the changes in age composition, in order to avoid the issues and contradictions that are found today in countries with "old populations". We are talking about modernizing the pension system, forming institutions of active longevity, developing a system of geriatric medical care, strengthening the social security system, and organizing training for families on caring for the elderly at home.
Migration

International and internal territorial movements play an important role in the development of Kyrgyzstan and its regions.

Internal migration, by redistributing the population from less developed to more developed parts of the country, generally contributes to economic growth and poverty reduction. Recently, there has been a concentration of population around the city of Bishkek and on the Osh - Jalal - Abad axis. Everywhere, except the capital region (Bishkek and Alamudun district), there is a migration loss of population, which is inversely proportional to the population size. That is, where the concentration of population is higher, there is less migration outflow. Bishkek had 625,000 inhabitants in 1989 and more than 1 million in 2019. This is about 16% of the country's population. More than 30% of the country's population lives in Bishkek, together with the adjacent Chu Oblast. The concentration of the population in Bishkek, Osh and Jalalabad and their suburbs creates a number of serious social and infrastructural problems and threatens the natural environment.

Since independence, the net migration outflow from Kyrgyzstan has been 0.6 million people. Loss of human capital and "brain drain" are associated with permanent migration. At the same time, as a result of emigration, a particularly large number of Kyrgyz natives live in Russia, Kazakhstan, Germany and Ukraine. They can act as connecting bridges in strengthening political, economic and cultural ties between states.

Labor migration has become an integral part of the economic life of the whole Kyrgyzstan and its individual families. In the main receiving country, Russia, according to the Ministry of Internal Affairs, in 2019 more than 450,000 Kyrgyz citizens were placed on a migration register for the purpose of "work". Another 20,000 worked with a temporary residence permit or a residence permit. According to the World Bank estimates as a result of labor migration, in 2019 the country received almost $2.5 billion, which was almost 30% of the country's GDP (Figure 7). From a macroeconomic policy perspective, the effects of labor migration have a positive impact on the country's economy, including benefits for households receiving remittances. Remittances are a constant source of foreign currency exchange, which allows maintaining the exchange rate of the national currency. Remittances also support domestic consumption, construction, services, durable goods imports, etc. Migration reduces the poverty rate in the country as a whole and in the regions, especially where labor migrants come from. Labor migration is an alternative to employment in the domestic labor market: employment abroad is a solution to the unemployment problem. While abroad, labor migrants acquire additional professional skills, thus increasing their own human capital. In this context, an effective migration policy, including pre-migration training and protection of migrants' interests and the use of the opportunities of the Eurasian Economic Union, will contribute to a demographic dividend in the Kyrgyz Republic.
Figure 7. Remittances of labor migrants to Kyrgyzstan (mln USD)

- 2019: 2689
- 2018: 1688
- 2017: 2278
- 2016: 78

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