

## **Kyrgyz Visa Disappointment**

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The Kyrgyz government feels it is being unjustly penalised by the introduction of harsh visa requirements

"Really? Come on!" protests Aigerim, a Kazak street-trader, after being told Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan may soon introduce a visa regime.

"Our governments don't care about ordinary people," he said. "All of us here shop at markets in Bishkek for fruit, vegetables and other foodstuffs. Almaty is farther away and the prices are higher. Now they add to our troubles with visas!"

Ministers from Astana and Bishkek will soon put the final touches to the visa initiative. But many in Kyrgyzstan believe it unfairly penalises them - and even Kazaks living in the border region, like Aigerim, are uneasy about it.

Under the scheme, seen as a move by Kazakhstan to protect its economy, people crossing the frontier will be obliged to buy travel coupons - costing 50 US cents for a 5-day visit and 50 dollars if they intend to stay for more than a month. These must be returned to the authorities on leaving.

In recent years, other countries have introduced visa regimes, but for different reasons: Turkmenistan because of its leadership's increasingly isolationist tendencies; and Uzbekistan to combat incursions by Muslim militants, the spread of radical Islamic ideas and drug-trafficking.

Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan are the only countries who have not initiated visa regimes, but because of their relatively small size and inferior economies they feel the impact of the travel restrictions most sharply.

At a Kazak border post, customs officers and soldiers are busy stopping cars, checking documents and searching luggage. A guard looks alarmed when questioned about the proposed regulations.

"It's crazy to have a visa regime!" he said. "There are dozens of buses passing through here, and thousands of cars. " His boss says it will be hard to implement, especially in the spring, the height of the agricultural season, when thousands of seasonal workers cross from Kyrgyzstan cross into Kazakhstan.

On the Kyrgyz side of the border, residents are also indignant about the proposed visas. Nadejda Pavlovna, from Leninskoe, crosses the frontier regularly by car to buy food. "We get pasta, spaghetti and other food products in Kazakhstan because they do not cheat us there, as they do here, and the service is better," she said. "If they introduce these certificates, it will be more difficult to visit my friends."

Dozens of buses from Kyrgyzstan head to Almaty every day. The passengers sell fruit and vegetables for Kazak tenge and buy tobacco and alcohol with the money.

At home, they exchange their left-over tenge for US dollars, which they re-sell for Kyrgyz soms, making a small profit. Some people work full-time in the big large markets of Almaty, leaving their families for months and even years at a time.

The high level of unemployment in Kyrgyzstan forces most of the able-bodied population to search for work in Kazakhstan, Russia and other countries. Thousands of migrant peasants from Kyrgyzstan depend on the tobacco plantations in the Almaty region for their livelihood. They head there every spring, despite the low salaries.

Some in Kyrgyzstan suspect Kazakhstan is using a visa regime to protect its own labour market - it has already unilaterally introduced passport requirements for Kyrgyz visitors. But Alisher Abdimomunov, chair of the international affairs committee in the Kyrgyz parliament, who represents a border area, says Astana's real motives are political.

"The fact is since we declared independence 10 years ago, we have failed to establish close ties with our neighbours Kazakhstan and Uzbekistan," he said. "The visa policy only adds to our already tense relations."

While its neighbours are tightening their border controls, Kyrgyzstan is moving in the opposite direction, granting US and other Western citizens travelling on diplomatic and service passports the right to enter Kyrgyzstan without visas. The privilege will be extended from August 1 to Japan.

"Kyrgyzstan has consciously chosen a policy of openness," Alisher Abdimomunov, a Bishkek parliamentary deputy, said. "Our heads of state are always assuring each other of eternal friendship. At the same time, new barriers are constantly being set up between ordinary people. It doesn't make sense, given the historically close ties between the region's people."

The harsh reality is that although the Central Asian states have taken many steps towards political integration, they always erect obstacles when they feel their interests are at stake. And the political, economic and geographical position of Kyrgyzstan means it suffers most from this policy.

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