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Kyrgyzstan knocks on Russia's door

by Olivia Kroth

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Kyrgyzstan is knocking on Russia's door. The Central Asian republic wants to join the Customs Union of Russia, Kazakhstan and Belarus. According to the Kyrgyz Economics Minister, Temir Sariyev, all the paperwork has been completed for Kyrgyzstan's entry into the Customs Union in 2014.

According to the Voice of Russia, Viktor Khristenko, Head of the Eurasian Economic Commission, said in an interview, "The common market of the Customs Union becomes a driver of growth. Mutual trade is growing at a pace of ten percent against the background of almost five percent in foreign trade."

He specified the reasons for this economic success, "The forming economic space means four degrees of freedom: free transition of goods, services, capital and labour force. Each of these is directly connected with the activities and the life of our member countries."

Viktor Khristenko qualified the interest of other countries to acquire membership as a sure indicator of the Custom Union's success, "The expansion of the Customs Union, the economic space, is a natural process. The manifestation of interest in participating in this organization is evidence of its success." Understandably, Kyrgyzstan wants to have a piece of the cake, as economic success always tastes sweet and will bring a multitude of benefits for Kyrgyz citizens. Today, Kyrgyzstan is inhabited by 70 percent of Kyrgyz and 10 percent of Russians, followed by other minorities.

Kyrgyz-Russian relations are several hundred years old, they did not just start yesterday. The territory became part of the Russian Empire after 1876. In 1936, the Soviet Republic of Kyrgyzstan was established. Even after the dissolution of the Soviet Union and declaration of Kyrgyzstan's independence, in 1991, the close ties remained. In 1996, the new Kyrgyz republic declared Russian as its second official language.

Among the population of Kyrgyzstan, about six million citizens, Islam is the dominant religion. Eighty percent are Muslims and seventeen percent Russian Orthodox. Animistic traditions can also be found. The Kyrgyz religious and public holidays illustrate very well the mixture of Islam and Russian Orthodoxy, the pride about independence, as well as the history as a member of the former Soviet Union.

The 1st of January is New Year's Day, followed by the Russian Orthodox Christmas Day on the 7th of January, and Nowrooz, the Iranian spring festival, on the 21st of March. Additional Muslim holidays are Orozo Ait and Kurman Ait. These dates are fixed according to the lunar calendar.

Soviet times are remembered on the 23rd of February, which is Fatherland Defenders' Day, and on the 9th of May, when the entire Russian Federation and many former Soviet Republics celebrate Victory Day, the end of the Great Patriotic War. Later in the cycle, the Day of the Great October Socialist Revolution is remembered on the 7th of November.

In contrast, Kyrgyz independence is proudly highlighted by such public holidays as the 5th of May, Constitution Day, and the 31st of August, Independence Day.

The Kyrgyz republic is mostly rural. About two-thirds of its people live from agriculture, which constitutes an important sector of the nation's economy. The irrigated Fergana Valley is very fertile and well-suited for growing fruits and vegetables.

Traditionally, livestock is bred, especially horses, sheep and yaks. The Kyrgyz are historically semi-nomadic herders, living in round tents which they call yurts. The nomadic tradition is still alive in seasonal transhumance. The Kyrgyz are excellent horse breeders. Their national sports evolve around horse riding. "At Chabysh" is a long-distance horse race, while in "Oodarysh" two contestants wrestle on horseback. In "Tyin Emmei," riders try to pick up a coin from the ground in full gallop. "Ulak Tartysh" is a team game on horseback.

Kyrgyzstan is rich in mineral resources: antimony, coal, gold and uranium. The country exports metals, minerals, agricultural products and electric energy, mainly to Russia, China and Kazakhstan. The Republic of Kyrgyzstan has already joined the CIS (Commonwealth of Independent States), CSTO (Collective Security Treaty Organization) and SCO (Shanghai Cooperation Organization).

The Kyrgyz Armed Forces took part in the CIS air defence exercises in November 2012, to drill on the neutralization of enemy planes potentially violating the CIS airspace. More than 9.000

servicemen, 100 combat aircraft and helicopters from Armenia, Belarus, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, Uzbekistan and Ukraine participated in these exercises.

CSTO, the Collective Security Treaty Organization, is formed by Russia, Armenia, Belarus, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan. They are planning to build a joint anti-aircraft and anti-missile shield, according to the chief of Russia's general staff, Lt. Colonel Valery Gerasimov.

SCO, the Shanghai Cooperation Organization, founded in 2001, comprises Russia, China, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan and Uzbekistan. On the 5th of December 2012, SCO leaders met in Bishkek, Kyrgyzstan, to discuss the establishment of the common Development Fund and the Development Bank. They also approved the SCO budget for 2013.

The Asian-Pacific region is a territory of pronounced economic growth. Therefore, the Russian Federation and the post-Soviet republics of Central Asia show great interest in turning eastwards, towards the Pacific and China.

Over the past years, the member countries of SCO have expanded their customs corridors and transport communications. The last meeting in Bishkek was a further step to join their efforts in achieving advantageous economic policies, for example by strengthening the SCO energy club.

Kyrgyzstan's capital city Bishkek, where the SCO summit took place, was originally founded as a rest stop for caravans on the Silk Road from China to the Mediterranean Sea. In 1862, it became a Russian garrison. Russian farmers settled around Bishkek and started farms on the fertile soil. With the foundation of the Soviet Republic Kirgiz ASSR in 1926, the city was re-named Frunze, after Mikhail Frunze, a native of Bishkek and close friend of Vladimir Lenin. He took part in the revolutions of 1905 and 1917.

Bishkek is located near the Ala-Too mountain range. To the north, a wide steppe stretches to the neighbouring country, Kazakhstan. Modern Bishkek, with its one million inhabitants, is a pleasant city, showing beautiful boulevards and public buildings, restaurants and cafés in the city centre.

Bishkek owns 21 banks. The two main bazaars are Dordoy Bazaar, a large wholesale market, and Osh Bazaar, a picturesque farmers' market. The economy of Bishkek is mostly agricultural, with fruits, vegetables and livestock being sold. Vendors offer their products not only in the two bazaars, but in stalls along the lively streets, too.

In 2003, Russia leased the Kant Air Base, east of Bishkek, which became the first military base outside of Russia's borders after 1991. Furthermore, Russia has a strategic base at the eastern end of Lake Issyk-Kul, where submarine and torpedo technology is tested, including the VA-111 Shkval torpedo, travelling at a speed of more than 200 knots.

Just recently, the lease of the base was prolonged. Russia will keep its military base in Kyrgyzstan until 2032, with an option to extend the contract by five years. This deal will come into effect at the end of January 2017, when the current lease expires. All Russian military facilities in Kyrgyzstan will be reorganized under one command. This includes the Kant airport,

the testing site on the Kara Balun peninsula, the communication point in the village of Spartak and the seismic station in the town of Mayлуу Suu.

On the other hand, the US base at Manas will be closed by 2014 and all western troops must leave the country. The Kyrgyz President, Almazbek Atambayev, does not want to have them there any longer. He is clearly a pro-Russian politician. The Manas Airport will become a civilian facility, free of any military component, after 2014.

Almazbek Sharshenovich Atambayev, born on the 17th of September 1956, has been the President of Kyrgyzstan since December 2011. He studied at the Moscow Institute of Management, where he received his degree in economics. He is very interested in having close economic relations with the Russian Federation.

When the prolongation of the lease for the Russian military base was signed, a host of economic agreements were also concluded. Russian-Kyrgyz trade relations are developing well. In 2011, the volume of bilateral trade grew by five percent. In the first six months of 2012, it increased by another 30 percent.

Russia will give financial aid to construct the Kambarata-1 hydropower plant at the Kambaratinsk Dam and the Upper Naryn Power Cascade. Furthermore, Russia will acquire shares in Kyrgyz industries, for example the torpedo factory which is located near the Issyk-Kul Lake. Additionally, Russia will spend 1.1 billion USD to re-equip the Kyrgyz military, and 1.5 million USD of Kyrgyzstan's debt has been written off.

Both presidents showed good understanding and harmony, when they met in Bishkek, in September 2012. The Kyrgyz President stressed the fact that cooperation with "the great nation of Russia" was very important for Kyrgyzstan. "Our two countries need cooperation which is beneficial for both," President Vladimir Putin replied.

The Kyrgyz leadership's flexibility is astounding, keeping a delicate balance between independence and alignment with the Russian Federation. In this context, a look at the symbolism of the Kyrgyz flag might be helpful.

The bright golden sun with its 40 rays, placed at the centre of the flag, represents the 40 warriors of the Kyrgyz national hero, Manas, after whom the Manas airfield has been named. The lines inside the sun symbolize the tündük (crown) of a yurt (tent), a popular motif in Kyrgyz art. The red part of the flag stands for two important facets of the Kyrgyz national character, willingness to keep peace and openness for new chances.

May the 40 mythical warriors of Manas keep Kyrgyzstan safe and well! May the bright, golden sun shine on the people of the Kyrgyz republic and the Russian Federation! May peace and openness guide these two brotherly nations in the 21st century!