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Study trip to Kyrgyzstan – ExpREES 2025

The ExpREES 2025 academic study trip to Bishkek, Kyrgyzstan, provided a unique opportunity to examine political, social, and economic dynamics in Central Asia through a series of meetings with local institutions, international organizations, and civil society actors. The program focused on key themes such as migration, gender equality, youth development, and democratization efforts in Kyrgyzstan.

Monday and Tuesday: Migration and Gender Perspectives

We started the week with a visit to the International Organization for Migration (IOM), where discussions centered on the role of remittances in Kyrgyz economy and the evolving patterns of labor migration. The emigration field in Kyrgyzstan, traditionally dominated by male emigration to Russia, is now shifting as the geopolitical factors cause a rise in female labor migration. Simultaneously, Kyrgyzstan is becoming a destination country for low-wage labor immigrants from South Asia, intensifying the labor market competition while also pushing the locals toward more skilled occupations. Apart from providing aid for the locals on the labor markets, IOM works toward integrating the emigrants to Kyrgyzstan, providing policy recommendations on wage regulations and improving data collection practices.



Photo: Oskari Kaunisto

After visiting IOM, we met with the Institute for Youth Development (IYD), a local NGO working on youth empowerment and cultural engagement. The organization promotes inclusive workspaces and artistic innovation as tools for fostering community-based development.

On Tuesday, we explored topics in gender equality in Kyrgyz society through a meeting with the UN Women. The session focused on critical humanitarian issues like forced marriage, limited female political representation, and the gendered distribution of property. Creative initiatives, such as promoting women's participation in sports, particularly in football, were highlighted as culturally embedded tools to provide women more visibility and voice in the community.

Wednesday: Security and Border Governance

The midweek program included a visit to the OSCE Program Office in Bishkek. The organization's multifaceted mandate includes support for rules of law, human rights, environmental protection, and conflict prevention. During the discussions, the different approaches to regional border issues and diplomacy, such as supporting peaceful resolutions of disputes, was highly emphasized in OSCE. The office aims to build a local capacity to reduce reliance on external assistance.

To conclude the day, we had a meeting with the EU-funded BOMCA program, that focuses on cross-border cooperation and border security in Central Asia. The program supports not only technical border management but

also the social implications of migration, particularly the vulnerability of families separated by borders. BOMCA's expanding focus from humanitarian issues to matters on trade and logistics highlights a shift toward more long-term regional stability.

Thursday and Friday: Education, Civil Society, and Democratization

During the last days of the program, we focused on educational institutions and development networks. The Aga Khan Development Network (AKDN) emphasized its work in early childhood education, health, and cultural preservation. Their initiatives are grounded in strengthening civil society and supporting local governance structures.



Photo: Essi Oikarinen

University visits included the University of Central Asia (UCA), which focuses on social and economic development on mountainous regions, and the Ala-Too International University (AIU), a leading Kyrgyz institution offering study programs in English. AIU's commitment to multilingual education and international collaboration was noted as a strong asset for the country's academic diplomacy.

The week concluded with a visit to the OSCE Academy in Bishkek, a regional hub for higher education and research. Discussions examined the institutional topics on democratic development where Kyrgyzstan excels, referencing its position as the most democratic country in Central Asia – despite its authoritarian classification (according to the Economist Intelligence Unit). The Academy emphasized that the initial steps toward democracy may be the most difficult for a country, yet they are also the most crucial for laying the foundation of sustainable democratic governance.

Conclusion

The study trip to Kyrgyzstan provided us an in-depth look into the multifaceted development landscape of a Central Asian state in transition. Through engagements with both governmental and non-governmental actors, we gained valuable insights into issues of migration, gender equality, education, and democratization. The week highlighted Kyrgyzstan's potential to serve as a model for regional cooperation and democratic innovation.



Our ExpReES group from the last row starting from the left-hand side: Selina Pasuri, Lotta Aro, Jenny Lindfors, Ossi Hentunen, Pinja Alhqvist, Ville Kuvaja, Markus Varonen, Erik Toikka, Oskari Kaunisto, Aleksi Rantanen, Pamela Mullo, Essi Oikarinen, Henri Rästas, Juho Heikkilä. On the couch starting from the left-hand side: Patricia Korhonen, Anni Kalliokoski, Sirke Mäkinen, Syed Sadiq (UN Women Representative), Hanna Peltonen. Photo: UN WOMEN