

Conference Overview
“Climate Migration in Central Asia:
challenges and solutions”

On October 19, 2022, the University of World Economy and Diplomacy (UMED) hosted an international conference on "Climate Migration in Central Asia: Challenges and Solutions". The event was organized by UMED in cooperation with the Regional Representative Office of the Foundation. Rosa Luxemburg (Germany). It was attended by leading experts in the field of climate change and overcoming its consequences from Uzbekistan, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan and the UK.

The hypothesis of the conference was that climate change in Central Asia poses a serious challenge to the long-term economic development and social stability of the countries of the region. Central Asia is already a territory of ecological instability, since it has the largest center of negative climate impact - Aralkum - the desert territory of the practically disappeared Aral Sea.

This problem is exacerbated by the melting of mountain glaciers in Tajikistan and Kyrgyzstan, which form most of the water resources of Central Asia, as well as the shallowing of Lake Balkhash in Kazakhstan, which in the coming years may turn into new large-scale environmental problems. The rate of climate degradation and problems with water resources may increase significantly with the stabilization of the situation in Afghanistan and an increase in the use of the waters of the tributaries of the Amu Darya for agricultural needs in the northern regions of this country.

The combined impact of these natural and anthropogenic factors will give impetus to a further sharp change in the usual climatic landscape in the form of an increase in air temperature, salinization and desertification of soils, an increase in the frequency of dust storms, shallowing of rivers, degradation of forest lands and traditional types of irrigation. All this can directly affect large masses of the population living in climatically vulnerable areas of Central Asia, causing the processes of their migration within their countries of residence, in Central Asia itself and beyond.

According to the pessimistic scenarios of the World Bank (Groundswell report), by 2050 the number of climate migrants in Central Asia may reach 2.4 million people, which may give rise to problems associated with a decrease in the population in rural areas and a simultaneous increase in the demographic burden on the capitals and the largest cities of the Central Asian states, a change in the habitual way of life of significant masses of the population, as well as an increase in the level of vulnerability of some social groups, including women and children.

The prospects for the development of events according to the above scenarios do not meet the interests of the Central Asian states. However, on the other hand, the threat of climate change opens a window of opportunity for developing new approaches to the wider use of "green" and water-saving technologies in agriculture and industry, the development of a new system of "environmental" values, worldview and education.

The above problems and trends brought up for discussion at the conference led to a discussion among the invited experts, who agreed that the threats to Central Asia posed by climate change are very serious.

Boriy Alikhanov, member of the Senate of the Oliy Majlis of the Republic of Uzbekistan, academician of the International Academy of Ecology and Life Safety (RF), cited Uzbekistan as an example of the negative impact of rapidly changing climatic conditions in the region, where since the early 1950s the average temperature growth rate was 0.27 °C per decade, which is almost twice the global warming rate. At the same time, in connection with the Aral Sea catastrophe, climate change is happening even faster and more severely. A characteristic feature of the climate of the Aral Sea region has become a high frequency and a significant duration of dust storms and snowstorms. In general, the climate on the territory of Uzbekistan is getting hotter and dryer from year to year. According to the UN World Meteorological Organization, in 2022 in Uzbekistan (at two marks in the Navoi region) the highest temperature (44 degrees Celsius) in the world was recorded. Regarding Central Asia, it was noted that the consequences of climate change will have a very significant impact on the environment and human life for the following reasons: firstly, the periods (seasons) of the year are shifting; secondly, the cyclical nature of precipitation is

disrupted; thirdly, the landscape of the earth is changing, desertification or swamping of the territory occurs (it should be noted that every minute the desert area in Central Asia increases by 9 m²); fourthly, there is a negative impact on certain sectors of the economy (for example, agriculture, water-intensive industries, etc.); fifthly, water intake and water consumption increase, water evaporation increases, incl. through plant transpiration; sixth, climate migration is created, etc.

Murat Bakhadirov, Dean of the International Relations Faculty (UWED), dealing with the problems generated by the drying up of the Aral Sea, expressed an alternative point on the nature of the current climate challenges in Central Asia. In his opinion, they are caused not only by anthropogenic factors, but can also be a phenomenon of cyclical climate change. In particular, the current increase in temperature in the region may be one of the rounds in the historically recorded series of climate change in Central Asia. In the history of the region, climate changes have occurred more than once, which led to an increase in temperature, prolonged periods of drought, a reduction in the area of glaciers, but then they were replaced by periods of increased humidity levels.

Such climatic processes have historically more than once become the cause of migration waves, an increase or decrease in political tension, a deterioration or improvement in the economic conditions of life for the peoples of the region. Also, historians and climatologists in their studies proved that the periods of climate change can be calculated from the level differences in the Aral Sea and mass migrations of peoples in the region.

Timur Idrisov, senior adviser at the environmental NGO “The Little Earth” (Tajikistan), noted that serious risks for the Central Asian region come from the problem of worsening water scarcity caused by melting glaciers and a decrease in snow cover in the Tien Shan and Pamir-Alai. The current rate of glacier mass loss is 0.2–1% per year. Many small glaciers have already disappeared. As a result, deviations in the intensity and geographical distribution of precipitation will be observed in the region - the southwest of Central Asia will become drier, and the northeast will be more humid. Long dry periods may be replaced by days with heavy rainfall. Along with rising temperatures and melting glaciers, precipitation

variability will affect the flow regime of rivers, including transboundary ones - the Amu Darya and Syr Darya.

An increase in the scarcity of existing water resources and deterioration in their quality will affect the population's access to water, including drinking water. There will be a threat to agriculture in Central Asia, which forms from 10 to 45% of the GDP of the countries of the region and employs from 20 to 50% of the working population. There will also be an increase in the likelihood and frequency of natural disasters. The prospects for hydropower in Central Asia will be threatened due to the expected seasonal decline in water levels or even the drying up of some small rivers.

The degradation of ecosystems and the deterioration of living conditions, including due to climate change, will affect the increase in seasonal or long-term migration. In countries where the proportion of the rural population is high, migration from villages to cities will increase.

Azamat Seitov, director of the Anthropology and Conflictology Laboratory of the Institute for Advanced International Studies (UWED), considering the problem of climate migration in relation to Uzbekistan, indicates that the outflow zones will be the northwestern and southern regions of the country (along and in the lower reaches of the Amu Darya River), where a decrease in the availability of both drinking water and irrigation is expected. The potential base of climate migrants is 6.67 million people. At the same time, he expressed doubt that Uzbekistan will be able to resettle such a large number of the population on its own, since the regions of the country where there is relatively free access to water are already relatively overloaded. Therefore, their likely option is to go abroad. Due to difficulties with knowledge of English, external climate migrants are likely to be oriented towards post-Soviet countries, primarily the Russian Federation.

Regarding the adoption of the necessary measures to respond to the problems associated with climate and climate migration, a number of recommendations were made by experts. According to Senator Bory Alikhanov, the main goal of joint actions of the Central Asian countries should be finding and implementing solutions to stabilize the region's water ecosystem. Innovative approaches are needed to stabilize glaciers and upper catchment ecosystems, increase the volume

of water resources, increase the efficiency of their use, further stabilize the Aral Sea zone, stop desertification and reduce the impact of droughts. All this will become the basis for eliminating risks for the socio-economic development of the region. However, in order to develop the right path, it is necessary to properly assess the intensity of climate change.

Vladimir Korotenko, chairman of the environmental movement "BIOM" (Kyrgyzstan), recognizing the threat of further climate degradation in Central Asia and climate migration, emphasized the need to accelerate the joint movement to develop and implement strategies for sustainable development and the formation of a "green" economy.

He proposed to pay more attention to identifying ways to solve socio-economic problems based on low-carbon development and reduce the negative impact on the environment through the introduction of market mechanisms for ensuring nature conservation measures, including emissions trading and the use of renewable energy sources.

In his opinion, it is important to intensify efforts in the field of sustainable nature management, aimed at sustainable forest management (including the use of non-timber forest resources), "organic" agriculture (from the conservation and wide use of genetic resources to ensuring the sustainable development of rural settlements), ecological and agro-tourism. It is also necessary to take measures in the field of education and culture, namely, to ensure the widespread use in educational programs of the ethical principles of sustainable development of the "Earth Charter".

The Earth Charter is an international declaration that reflects the fundamental principles and values for building a sustainable and just global society in the 21st century. The document points to the interconnectedness and inseparability of issues of environmental protection, human rights, equal human development and peace.

Yerlan Karimov, Deputy Director of the Secretariat for Sustainable Development of the Institute for Economic Research (Kazakhstan), called for greater attention to the use of renewable energy sources by the Central Asian countries and their transition to a more efficient use of energy and water resources, which have great socio-economic potential. Also, the focus should be on the issue

of adaptation to climate change through the adoption of tough measures to reduce greenhouse gas emissions.

As an example, he cited Kazakhstan, which is currently working on a Carbon Neutral Development Strategy until 2060. It is planned to record the adoption of the following measures: abandoning new coal generation projects and phasing out coal combustion (2021-2025), implementing a program to plant 2 billion trees (2025), doubling the share of renewable energy sources in generation (2030 100% sorting of municipal solid waste (2040), sustainable agriculture on 75% of arable land (2045), 100% electrification of personal passenger transport (2045), use of only green hydrogen and the complete elimination of coal production (2050). According to E. Karimov, measures should also be taken on climate labeling of the budget, which can help develop a mechanism for identifying government spending aimed both at greening the economy and spending that has a negative impact on the climate. Budget climate labeling is a government-initiated process for identifying, measuring and monitoring climate-relevant government spending. The main advantage of having a climate-labeled budget for a country is the transparency, accountability and information content of budget expenditures, which can also contribute to the development of green bonds.

Azat Irmanov, UNODC National Program Coordinator, touched upon the issue of corruption risks in the implementation of measures to compensate or eliminate the consequences of climate change that can lead to climate migration. He pointed out that the following factors can lead to the emergence of a corruption effect: inefficient organization of human resource management and lack of competencies at the institutional level.

The prevalence of systemic corruption (within the relevant response institutions) leads to an overestimation of costs while reducing their impact and results. It is also capable of compromising the readiness control system through distorted information flows, creating the appearance of a false readiness for a crisis. In times of crisis, petty corruption has a negative effect on victims who do not receive, or receive insufficient support.

To eliminate corruption, it is necessary to systematically combat it through anti-corruption measures, and through a change in the system of values in society.

The state should actively involve non-governmental non-profit organizations, activists and opinion leaders. Evidence-based principles of forming a negative public opinion towards corruption should be used as a tool of "soft power".

In general, the conference held at UWED can be considered the first step towards a broader academic and practical discussion of the problem of climate migration in the Central Asian region, which will help develop scenarios and measures for a comprehensive response to the challenges of climate migration with a special focus on solving social problems.

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