

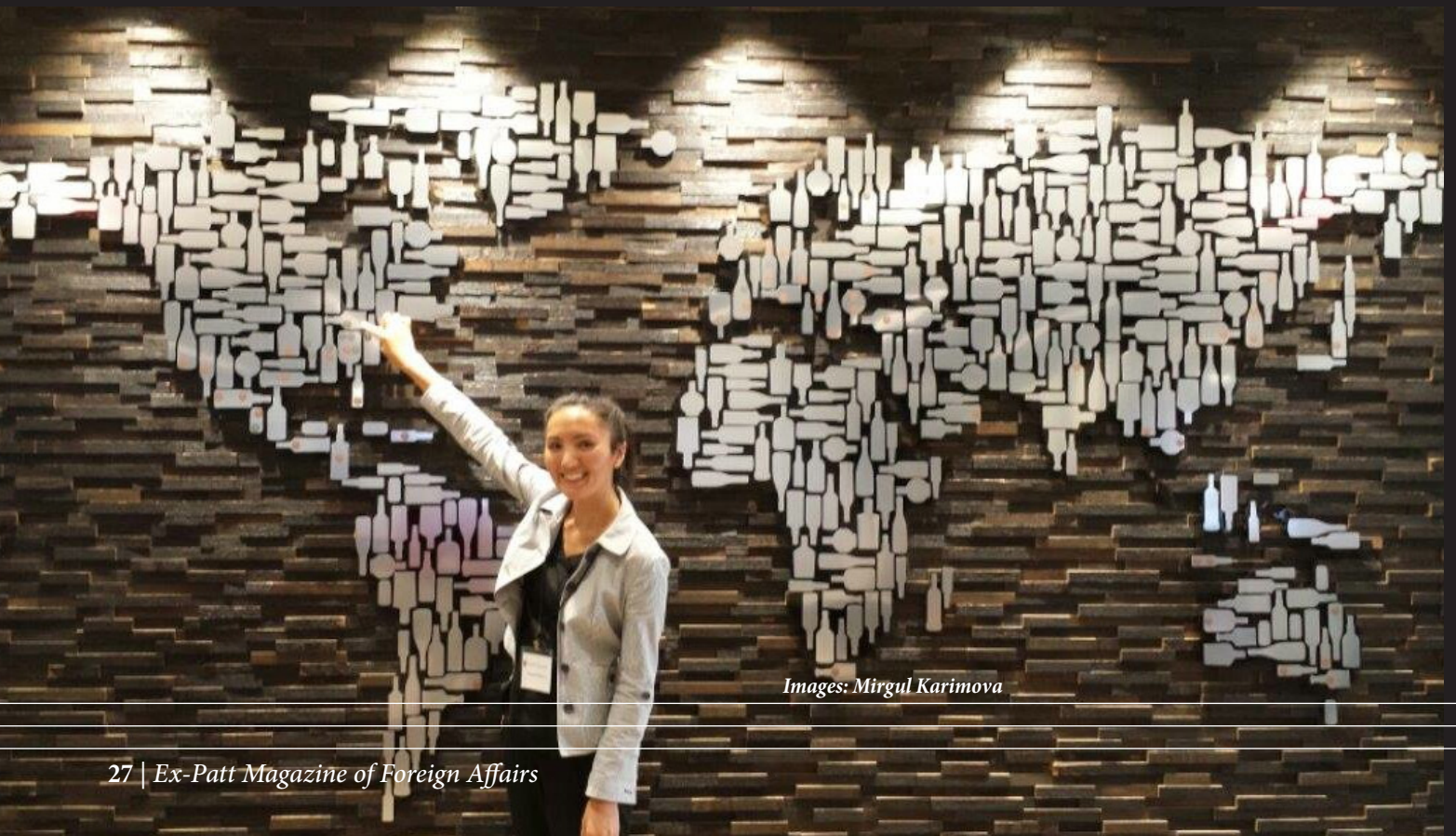
Unbridled Spirit: *A Foreigner in the Bluegrass*

Arriving to Lexington from Kyrgyzstan on August 4, 2013, I was not new to the United States. Luckily, my academic adventures had already taken me throughout Europe, the post-Soviet space, and the U.S. My first time in the States was more about the cultural experience, as I attended a high school and lived with an American family. As a more mature foreigner, the current experience offers an opportunity to explore more of the unknown places in the United States.

As Fulbright scholar, I did not get to select my academic institution, nor was I granted a chance to choose the state where I was to live for over a year pursuing a master's degree. Now I am thankful, as my sponsor, the U.S. Department of State's Bureau for Education and Cultural Affairs matched my desires with the best it

could offer. Today I would not change Lexington, Kentucky for any other option, even a more internationally-recognized name.

Some of the first questions I often receive as a foreigner with a rare background in Kentucky typically include, "So, how different is Kentucky from your country ('Kyrgyzstan' is a difficult to pronounce and relatively unknown here)?" "Have you ever been to church?" "Do you guys like Putin?" and "Did you know anything about Kentucky before?" Probably the answers are also unexpected, but, hopefully they give some idea about where I am coming from. For example, there are more similarities than differences between Kyrgyzstan and Kentucky: strong family institutions with (relatively) early marriages, amazing horse farms, beautiful landscapes with gorges all around, and very hospitable people. The question on Mr. Putin sounds funny at first. People's "tastes" differ, even in Kyrgyzstan: it is difficult for me to speak for the entire country; but, personally I do not appreciate authoritarian rulers and wish the world would become more truly democratic. Answering the inquiry on awareness about Kentucky might be saddening, but I did not know much about the state beforehand, besides limited knowledge and stereotypes about KFC and horses. These Q&A ses-



Images: Mirgul Karimova

sions have helped me become comfortable and enjoy life in the land of bourbon, world-famous horse racing, and the bluegrass.

The Patterson School of Diplomacy and International Commerce was a great environment to begin my voyage in Kentucky. It offered the space for discourse and discussion, and was surrounded by smart young professionals in fields varying from banking and commerce to human rights. The extra-curricular activities are the most enriching part, as they encourage the students to build a family which reminds me more of the stereotypical American melting pot. A few recommendations I would have as an international scholar to the University of Kentucky – the most international atmosphere that Lexington offers – would include ‘bringing in’ more international figures that could contribute to the enrichment of Kentucky society. In addition, by traveling more, local community representatives could expel stereotypes about the world and help Kentucky become even more welcoming of tourists. A final suggestion would be to open up and experience other cultures, as a more diverse Kentucky would provide a greater opportunity to learn about itself and what makes it unique. My experience interning at the office of Andy Barr, a U.S. congressman representing Kentucky’s 6th district, solidified my conviction about the above recommendations.

Volunteering at Andy Barr’s Office during the summer of 2014 was a great way to learn more about the state and contribute back. With the aim of producing policy recommendations addressing drugs abuse and addiction in Central Kentucky, I had the advantage of being outside politics and, furthermore, being a researcher with an international perspective in the field. My research covered 11 of the 19 counties in the 6th District and comprised of three-month learning about the issue through 90-minute interviews and focus group discussions with key representatives from state and non-state actors. I also spoke with victims of the escalating drug problem and analyzed available comparative (nation-wide) data. At first, I was shocked by the sad picture I received as a result of the short-term investigation: the drug overdose mortality rate (750 people/year) increased 23 times for Kentucky during

last 10 years and the stereotype about eastern part of the state experiencing the most “attack” from drugs is an incorrect statement. However, after reassessing the current conditions of Kentucky, the belief in a brighter future for my second home reemerged. My host community has two natural advantages -- its people or, specifically, the resource capacity they offer, and the land -- that should lead, if managed consciously, to eventual success in terms of anti-drug efforts and development of the state in general.

Human capacity and open land space seem to be the luxuries that are not highly valued in the local economy. On the one hand the limited state budget plays a role in the attempt to justify why things are not better; however, financial reasoning is not a strong argument because every state faces that problem. Poor management and bureaucratic obstacles might sound a little more convincing, though, again, many similar cases operate well in other states, for instance, Oregon. When it comes to human and geographical advantages, we do not perceive them as something special, as an old Russian proverb would suggest, “We do not value what we have, but we cry when it is taken away”, or “The grass is greener on the other side”. However, I believe Kentuckians and their blue grass are truly special.

Kentucky is blessed with the capacity of its cross-generational driven population. I have rarely seen an 80-year old man (Kyrgyzstanis would kindly refer to him as “grandpa” to show respect) running an NGO or even an older woman grocery shopping herself. To me, as a Kyrgyzstani, it is not about cultural differences, nor is it about prejudice. These conclusions are based on long-term observations, research, and analysis. It is true that the quality of education in Kentucky was hit by the lack of attention in the past; however, the state still offers one of the best facilities and many academic resources for student growth and development. Moreover, my host community has something that many modern societies, unfortunately, lack – a solid feeling of connectedness to the land which brought them to this world. To me, this strong tie means responsibility and concerns for Kentucky’s future.

Certainly, my first search after landing in the Bluegrass

Airport would be for ... bluegrass! Unfortunately, it was a humid August night. After almost eight hours spent in the air flying from San-Francisco, I let myself be patient enough and wait until the next (my first!) morning in Kentucky. The grass really was blue, shining under the sun with drops of water on, and very abundant, as it grew all over. That telling picture will always be in my memories, no matter how far away life takes me from Kentucky. Only after traveling around the state and visiting major manufacturing plants, industrial entities, farms and households, state and private corporations, did I realized that the land could produce even more, and, therefore, become more efficient. Again, I am not contrasting Kentucky to international megapolises, nor I am comparing it with the widely open steppes and valleys of Central Asia. It is an outcome of looking at socio-economic issues and available natural resources simultaneously. As farming and horse breeding have already made a name for Kentucky (and not only in the U.S.), those should be the two aspects that, built-in to proven business plans, would generate economic growth, attracting national and international consumers to the quality brands available here.

Some investors do not appreciate the geographic location that Kentucky happened to be in; however, its proximity to bigger markets (i.e., Kentucky is within an hour of flight to 69 percent of the U.S.' population) and low costs for establishing businesses are positive attributes which should attract investors. Maybe, I should believe



the references I have received from business people that “there is no eligible workforce available (due to the third highest in the nation rates of alcoholism and drugs abuse).” However, as a (now-become) typical Kentucki-

an, I am too stubborn to accept that fact and would continue pressing on the advantages business people should see here, which could benefit their businesses in the long run. Patience, vision, and persistence, given the wide local support, should make things work profitably. I am



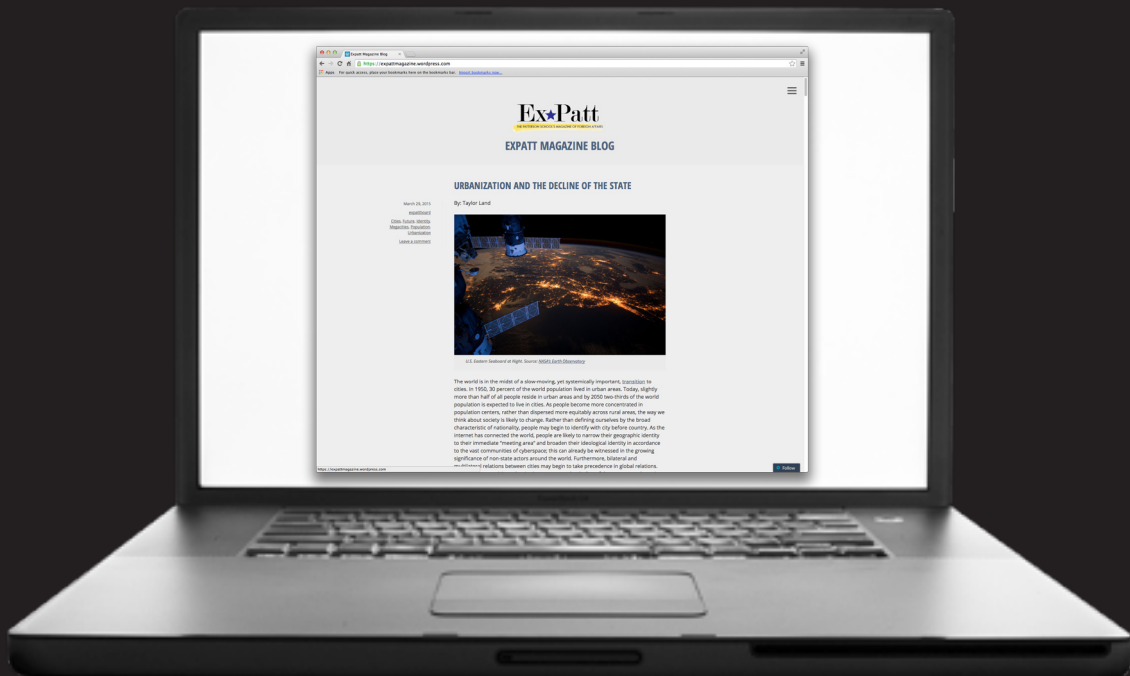
thankful for the chance to share these views with key politico-economic actors living the experience in Kentucky fully.

If there is anything I regret about as a foreign scholar in the bluegrass state, it is the time constraints of my stay. It prevents me from contributing more to the land which made me feel welcomed, learning more about the world and testing myself on the awareness of global issues, experiencing local culture with adult lenses on this time, and taking lessons to become a true cosmopolitan one day. The Patterson School, specifically, has helped me find a new family which I will always carry in my heart. The academic environment it has offered made me realize how complicated and simple things are if you know exactly what you want from life and what you stand for. Often, taking a look at life in Kentucky from outside, or, possibly, trying to live in a few worlds at the same time, would always give me an opportunity to balance out some viewpoints and feel a huge respect for the nation that hospitably hosted me twice, no matter all the domestic and international challenges it is trying to overcome. I can only hope that in future I will be able to give something back.

 **Mirgul Karimova**



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