“We all knew each other before; almost everyone greeted each other. It was such a good time. It was clean everywhere. Houses were nice and green. However, now there are so many unknown faces. They came here from the mountains, uncivilized, rude, and uneducated. No one says hello to you. Our settlement changed a lot and for the worse” (N63, interview from October 2, 2001, Kemin settlement).

The extract above expresses an oft heard sentiment during the time of “the great movement” of Kyrgyz people within the country. The words were uttered by a woman living in a settlement two hours by car from the capital, Bishkek. She was speaking about the process by which the majority of Russian-speaking people had left the country to be replaced by ethnic Kyrgyz people from remote areas moving into the formers’ houses. These words epitomize the majority of narratives from the “old” inhabitants of a settlement or town about “newcomers”. The statement also exposes the results of 70 years of Soviet policy, according to which the mobility of the indigenous populations was constrained, and to some extent the hidden but consistent state intervention into the (national and civic) identity sphere.

I observed attempts to squat on the territory of Pobedy Park, in the south of Bishkek, in the week following the Tulip revolution of March 24, 2005. Despite widespread talk of “migrants”—in this case, those from remote areas—occupying the land, I saw people who were of a decidedly “urban” appearance or who had lived in the city for a relatively long period of time. Everyone there was hoping to get a plot of land. Territory had already been divided into plots and people were sitting on “theirs” ready to defend them. I joined one the groups that was making a list of names staking claims to a plot of land. Elbowing my way through a crowd and being jostled, I asked to be included on the list. A person wrote my name on a piece of paper, giving me the name and phone number of another individual who would have the “necessary connections” to answer further questions. Conversations I overheard were typically as follows: They promised to accommodate everyone who needs it . . . or In a year, the cost of this land will
rise and we can then profit. This indicated to me that not all of the people there were recent migrants who needed the land for accommodation, but rather there were those who already had a place to live and were hoping to benefit opportunistically from the situation. Later, the city government managed to evict these people and protect the park, promising land in another part around the city, though this remains only a pledge.

However, squatting in other areas proved more successful. The “establishment” of Fifteenth Street in Kelechek1 (there were 14 officially recognized streets there before 2005) came about in the short period of time after the events of March 24. It consists of territory between the road and bazaar that officials had not previously recognized as a residential area. During my visit to Kelechek, in September 2005, I saw the foundations or even walls of houses under construction in this area that had previously been empty. In October 2007, during a further visit, I interviewed a woman in one of the finished small houses on Fifteenth Street. She told that she had two more plots of land there for her sons who were currently in Russia. She had moved with her family (a husband and four small children) to Kelechek in 1993, for a better life. Their life in her place of origin, Batken, had become too difficult, almost hopeless. They lived in Kelechek permanently, renting rooms and working hard, performing the most tiring and dirtiest jobs. However, she stated that she was now happy and proud of the achievement of her family: they now had a house and her sons in Russia had given a car to their father (even if it was secondhand). They now aimed to legalize their houses, which she believed they would do together with their neighbors. Later, other contacts stated that this woman was one of the most active squatters on this land. While she and others now living on Fifteenth Street had previously lived in Kelechek, they had not had the chance to actually legally own a house.

Migration, both foreign and domestic, is a litmus test that reflects political, economic, and social changes over the long term. By following the main flows and directions of migration over time, one can paint a chronological picture of the development of Kyrgyzstan and understand why internal migration is so prevalent in the country, including the processes and reasons that drive it. Accordingly, this chapter considers the process of internal migration in Kyrgyzstan from a chronological

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1 Kelechek is a suburban area of Bishkek, established at the end of the 1980s and inhabited by internal migrants, that forms one of my research “subjects” in examining the influence of urbanization on Kyrgyz identity, 2004–7.