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STUDIES

January
2014

The Integration of Migrants in Russia: Why Does Tension Continue to Grow?

Abstract

During the last 2-3 years, the integration (or rather non-integration) of migrants has become the burning issue of Russian migration. The reason has its roots in the growth of inter-ethnic tension and manifestations of open nationalism, which are in turn the result of people's wider discontent with social inequality and administrative dereliction combined with a crisis in national self-identification. Ineffective migration management, resulting in wide-scale irregular migration, exasperates Russian society and fuels social strain.

CARIM-East

Project co-financed by the EU



What was the Russian integration policy after the collapse of the Soviet Union and how has it evolved?

In the 1990s, the integration of migrants was not seen as an integral part of State migration policy for objective reasons. Initially, migration inflow to Russia consisted primarily of: 1) Russian people who found themselves in other Soviet republics during the time of the USSR's disintegration or 2) representatives of other nationalities of the USSR who had been perceived as citizens of a single country. These migrants did not face the problem of knowledge of the Russian language. They had relatively high levels of education. In their employment, they also benefited from the formerly-common system of skills training and unified qualification requirements. All these factors made their integration in Russia easier, even if they were ethnically distanced migrants from Central Asian republics or Transcaucasia.

In this period, the Russian migration policy adhered to a laissez-faire position and made no efforts to elaborate integration mechanisms to make migrants' entry into the Russian society smoother. In many cases, it was rather on the contrary. Elaborated in a hurry, migration legislation put many migrants who had arrived to Russia in 1990s with Soviet passports in a situation in which they found themselves unable to obtain Russian citizenship due to their failure to comply with various formal criteria, lack of certain papers, missing archives, etc. Therefore, they unexpectedly found themselves without legal status in Russia. By the end of 1990s the number of such "non-status" migrants was estimated to be up to 3 million.¹ Gradually, by fair means or foul, many of them managed to become legalized in Russia. However, even now, the number of "non-status" migrants who stay in Russia for the long term is estimated to be in the hundreds of thousands and their integration is seriously complicated

Now, however, after over two decades of post-Soviet history, integration issues are focused on fundamentally different categories of migrants. These are: 1) migrants who arrived in Russia from former Soviet republics for permanent residence. They consisted mainly of titular nations from these republics and most of them benefited from the facilitated procedure of obtaining Russian citizenship that was granted to CIS citizens. (Their total inflow was about 1.8 million between 2000 and 2012); and 2) migrant workers who come to Russia from CIS states, primarily Central Asia, in search of employment. (Their numbers are estimated to be 3 to 5 million, including unregistered migrants). These are mostly people who were born, or at least grew up, in the new sovereign states which were distanced from Russia. In these states, belonging to one's own nation was stressed and Russian language was forced out of the schools and everyday life. These migrants definitely need support in their adaptation in Russia.

In this "new wave" of migrants, migrant workers are a matter of particular concern. Most of them are young people who have very low levels of knowledge of the Russian language, no skills, and no knowledge of Russian laws, rules and norms. They go to Russia because, on the one hand, their local labour market is not providing them with jobs, and because on the other hand, there is a stereotype of model behaviour in their countries: "one should go to Russia for earnings". This stereotype is supported by ethnic social networks which have formed during the last two decades, and by networks of criminal ethnic mediator-recruiters who have made labour migration from their countries a profitable business

¹ Vladimir Iontsev, Irina Ivakhnyuk, Russia in world migration flows: trends of the last decade (1992-2001 // The World in the Mirror of International Migration. Scientific series "International Migration of the Population: Russia and the Contemporary World". Edited by Vladimir Iontsev. Volume 10. Moscow: MAKS Press, 2002: <http://www.demostudy.ru/library/>



What issues are linked and contribute to irregular migration in Russia?

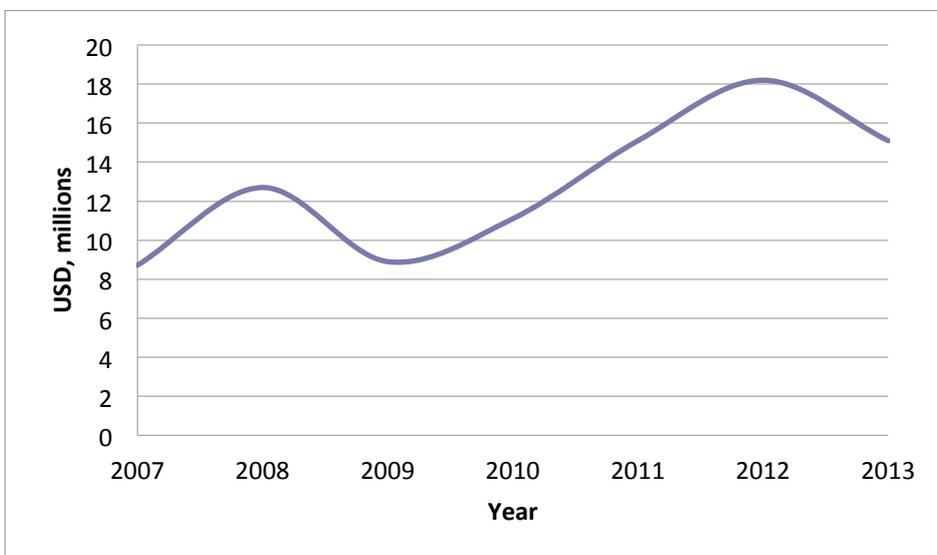
The Russian foreign labour legislation established in 2007 provides a relatively liberal and clear procedure for labour migrants from CIS states to become officially registered and to obtain a work permit in Russia by themselves. Even after restrictions were introduced in 2009 as a response to the economic crisis, migrants have had an opportunity to change employers within their initial three months of stay in Russia. However, during the past 4-5 years this procedure has become absolutely impossible for migrants to access directly without middlemen. A network of shadow mediators stands between migrants and the legal labour market, benefiting from migrants' ignorance of the rules and lack of knowledge of Russian language. As a result, getting a work permit costs migrants not less than 30,000 rubles (700 euro). Therefore, the majority of migrant workers who come to Russia are employed without permission, i.e. irregularly.

The irregularity and isolation of migrants is combined with their growing numbers. While official data on

formally-employed foreign workers demonstrates a declining trend since the 2008-2009 crisis, statistics on remittances prove the contrary. The Russian Central Bank data shows that already in 2010 the amounts of money transferred by foreign physical persons from Russia via official money-transferring systems—Russian analogous of Western Union and the main channel of migrant remittances—went up sharply and continued growing in further years (Table 1). This data is an indirect illustration of the growing number of migrants in Russia. In combination with official statistics they are the evidence of the growing sector of irregular migration. Even Konstantin Romodanovsky, Director of the Federal Migration Service of Russia, acknowledged in his recent interview that within the last four years (2009-2012) the total migrant inflow to Russia increased by over 1/3 and that the new tough rules for migrant lawbreakers are aimed at reducing the irregular stay and employment of foreign workers²

²“There should be a civilized stick”. Interview with Konstantin Romodanovsky, Director of the Federal Migration Service of Russia. Kommersant, N:192, 21.10.2013, p. 1-4

Figure 1. Remittances from Russia to CIS states, transferred by foreign physical persons via official money transferring systems



* 2013 - Data for I-III quarters.

Source: Central Bank of Russia: <http://www.cbr.ru/statistics/?Prtid=svs>



Irregular – and therefore uncontrolled – migration is a source of migration-related tension in Russia. Police regularly extract bribes from migrants without documents. As the main beneficiary of large numbers of irregular migrants, the police are interested in maintaining the status quo rather than combating the causes of irregular migration. On the other hand, irregular migration is effectively used by authorities as a buffer to re-direct public exasperation with internal socio-political problems to the “inevitable” challenges of migration.

During election campaigns, all the parties and candidates led by the dominating public opinion emphasize migration-related problems (exaggerated criminality, socially dangerous disease risks, cultural distance, labour and wage dumping, pressure on Russian identity) rather than proposing improvements in migration policy, such as the integration of migrants. The most recent example is the election of the mayor of Moscow in early September 2013. The election campaign was followed by numerous spot checks against irregular migrants and even the construction of encampments for hundreds of detained migrants subjected to deportation in the territory of the capital city. Inspired by politicians and authorities, media plays locals against migrants by focusing on criminal news in which people with a “different shape of eyes” are involved. This only further contributes to the “anti-migrant hysteria”³

What are some of the internal inter-ethnic integration challenges?

After the disintegration of the Soviet Union, the unity of the “Soviet people” collapsed. In the sovereign Russian Federation, where multi-ethnicity had been an element of Russian culture and national self-consciousness for many years, the feeling of the unity of the nation corroded. Ethnic Russians comprise 80% of the total population of Russia but in addition, over 190 indigenous nationalities live traditionally

in the territory of the Russian Federation. With the current heightened ethno-sensitiveness of Russians, any kind of “encroachment” on Russianness is perceived painfully.

Stressing the challenges of international migration is often used to mask internal ethnic-based conflicts. Difficult socio-economic situations in the North Caucasus republics – Chechnya, Dagestan, Ingushetia – and mass migration from these republics to other Russian regions has provoked anti-Caucasus sentiments. However, this is an issue of internal policy that is correlated with the political integrity of the Russian Federation. A delicate and consistent inter-ethnic policy is needed.

At the highest political level, confusion between growing Russian nationalism and the inflow of migrants was articulated by Vladimir Putin in his manifesto-like article “Russia: An Inter-Ethnic Issue,” published in January 2012. He recognized people’s fears of migration and called for a tough migration policy in order to protect the national self-identification of Russians. This article has had a great impact on the Concept of the State Migration Policy of the Russian Federation through 2025 (approved by the Decree of President Putin on June 13th, 2012) and the Strategy of the State Inter-Ethnic Policy of the Russian Federation through 2025 (approved by a Decree of President Putin on 19 December 2012).

Both strategic documents seem unable to reduce inter-ethnic tension in the least. The growth of tension is demonstrated both in the results of public opinion polls (Figure 2) and in everyday routines. With the State’s inaction with respect to the provision of order and safety for local population, xenophobia in minds turns into xenophobia in actions.

³ As defined by Lidia Grafova, Russian journalist and President of the NGO “Migration Communities Forum” (cited from: Migration XXI century, № 4(19) 2013, p.18 (in Russian): <http://mirpal.org/migrjournal.html>)

⁴ See <http://www.putin-itogi.ru/2012/01/23/statya-v-v-putina-rossiya-nacionalnyj-vopros/> (accessed 31 March, 2014).

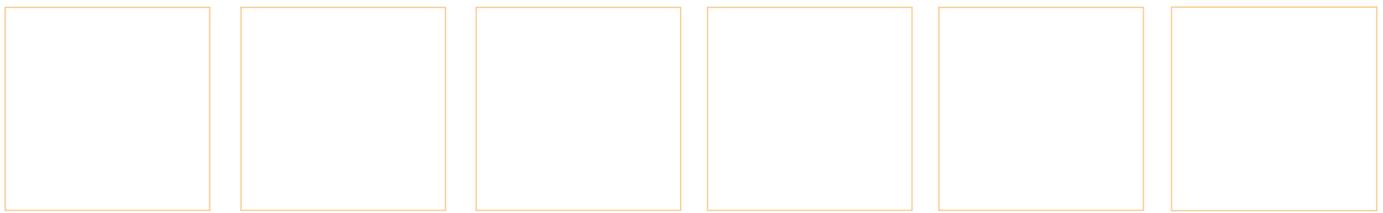
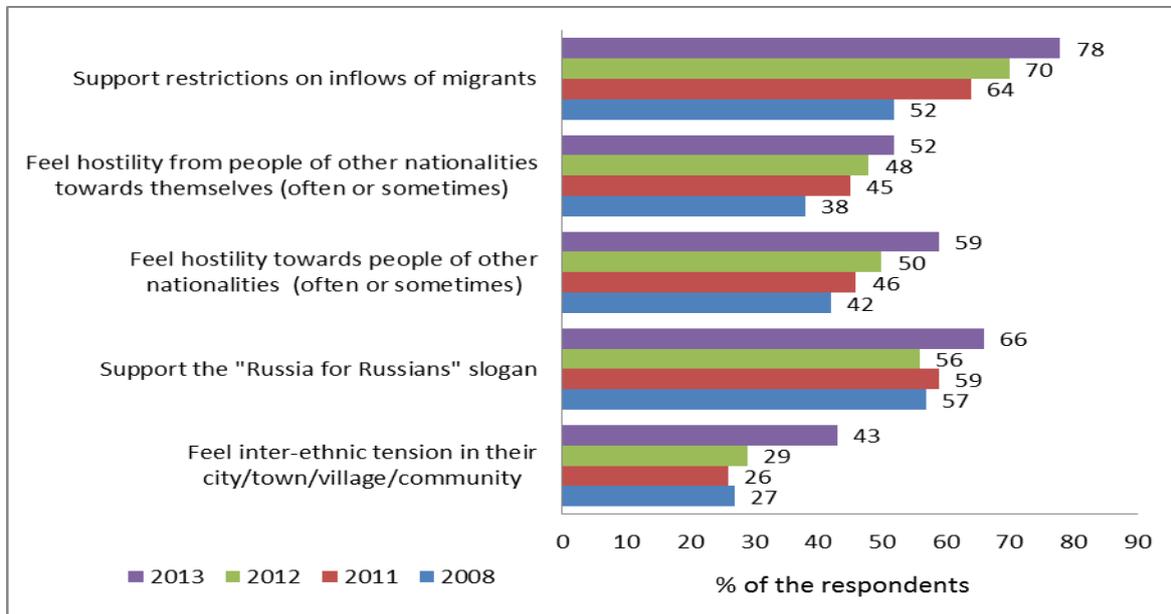


Figure 2. Growth of interethnic tension and anti-migrant perceptions reflected by the results of public opinion polls* 2008-2013



* Polls included a sample of 1500 respondents drawn from urban and rural populations aged 18+ in 130 localities of 45 administrative units throughout Russia. Statistic inaccuracy of the results of these pools is considered less than 3.4%.

Source: Levada-Center Independent Analytical Service, November 5th, 2013 : <http://www.levada.ru/05-11-2013/rossiyane-o-migratsii-i-mezhnatsionalnoi-napryazhennosti>

Recent anti-immigrant riots have shown that nationalism and xenophobia are not the preserve of a few extremists but are turning rapidly into a leading mainstream concern. People feel unsafe and unprotected in the face of growing numbers of aliens while municipal administration and police dissociate themselves from safeguarding social cohesion. The anti-immigrant confrontations in Moscow⁵ demonstrated several lessons to the local and federal authorities: 1) society has explosively disintegrated and applies a ‘friend-or-foe’ identification system based on ethnic factors; 2) police corruption and administrative dereliction result in a distrust of the Law and State and drive people to solve emerging conflicts by mob law; 3) even without instigation from radical nationalistic organizations, people are highly sensitive to ethnic-based discord; 4) politicians’ anti-migrant rhetoric fuels public anti-migrant riots.

Concluding remarks

Migration issues in Russia have been closely linked with the painful process of post-Soviet national identity-building. While initially, migrant integration was not a major policy concern, the subsequent years have proved the need for such policy. With the economic and demographic need to further attract foreign workers, a well-elaborated and consistent integration policy is important. The challenge is will a growing xenophobic aggression among the local population and – in response – an increasingly aggressive ethnic solidarity among aliens. In this situation, the current shaping of the “State philosophy of ‘anti-migration-ism’”, which is called to justify the inability of the authorities to cope with migration management, plants a time-bomb under social cohesion in Russia.

⁵ The most recent resonant case in the Moscow administrative district Biryulyovo, in October 2013, demonstrated that anger about migrants has reached the boiling point. The murder of a 25-year-old Russian man who was stabbed to death by a man of “non-Slavic appearance” triggered a spontaneous wave of pogroms



Migration Policy Centre

The Migration Policy Centre at the European University Institute, Florence, conducts advanced research on global migration to serve migration governance needs at European level, from developing, implementing and monitoring migration-related policies to assessing their impact on the wider economy and society. The Migration Policy Centre is co-financed by the European Union.

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