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Asylum, Refugees, and IDPs in Russia: Challenges to Social Cohesion

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Foreign Policy Context

Russia faced challenges of forced migration after the break up of the Soviet Union, when in the beginning of the 1990's, as a result of a wave of violence and armed conflicts, the Russian Federation experienced an influx of people who had left their places of residence in the newly independent states.¹

In the absence of legal norms (federal legislation was adopted in 1993) and relevant institutions (the Federal Migration Service (RF FMS) was created in the middle of 1992), these persons were deprived of any kind of social and governmental support. In view of the difficult economic situation, the Russian authorities tried to draw the attention of the global community and international organizations to the problem of forced migration in post-Soviet areas. In this vein one needs to consider Russia's accession to the UN Convention on the Status of Refugees in 1951 and to its Protocol from 1967 (1992)², attempts to establish cooperation with the countries of the CIS (1994 Agreement), and initiatives to hold high-level international conferences ("Geneva Process"), 1993-1996.

At the same time, public authorities make serious efforts to organize reception, shelter, and the provision of basic assistance to asylum seekers, as well as to Russian citizens who ended up outside of Russia and are arriving in the country of their own citizenship on an emergency basis. By 1994, the Russian FMS becomes an effective organization, which provides, within its competence and operating on a legal framework created by this time and with extremely scarce financial resources, whatever assistance it can to forced migrants. However, the peak of the forced migrations, which occurred from 1993-1995, in subsequent years gradually decreased, to a large extent due to the cessation of the armed conflicts in the post-Soviet areas outside of Russia, their freezing (from 1994), and the awareness of potential applicants for refugee and forced migrant status³ that help from the Russian government was but an ephemeral hope. By the 2000's, forced migration practically ends and draws less and less attention from society and the state.

Domestic Policy Context

The conflicts which arose in Russia's own territory in the beginning of the 1990's (the Ingush-Ossetian, and Chechen conflicts) led to flows of IDPs, mostly subjects of the Northern Caucasus, which seriously complicated the situation in these regions which received the main flows of refugees from the Armenian-Azeri conflict zones, from Southern Ossetia and Abkhazia, as well as Meskhetian Turks who had come from Uzbekistan.

In the beginning of the 1990's, the main flows of people coming to Russia and applying for refugee or IDP status were Russians and representatives of minorities that were traditional for Russia. In subsequent years their proportion gradually decreased which became one of the causes of concern for regional authorities as well as the host population.

Another cause for concern was that even Russian refugees and representatives of traditional minorities were perceived as competitors by the host population, which exacerbated tensions in the housing market, labor and social security and negatively influenced social infrastructure. In the

¹ The first flows of migrants appeared even before the breakup of the Soviet Union.

² Russia's accession to the UN Convention of the Status of Refugees in 1951 and its Protocol in 1967 was a hasty decision that was not well thought out (Russia ratified the Convention in 1992). It was affected by the lack of experience of the just formed the RF FMS and the insistence of Russia's Ministry of Foreign Affairs which demonstrated that the accession to the Convention did not lead to additional costs to the Federal Budget.

³ The status of forced migrants is granted to Russian citizens who have come to Russia from a State of their permanent or primary residence and also to IDPs regardless of their citizenship (FL, 1995).

extremely difficult economic situation of that time, economic motives played a crucial role in the creation of a tense atmosphere between migrants and the host population.

Regional authorities took restrictive measures everywhere, limiting migrant streams: they universally adopted legislation and by-laws for subjects of the Federation which limited residence permits and home sales, and established additional taxes and collection not only for foreign citizens but also for Russian citizens arriving from outside the region. In cases where there were weak Federal authorities, discriminatory measures for asylum seekers and IDPs, despite persistent opposition of the Constitutional Court, continued in certain regions (for instance, Stavropol and Krasnodar Districts) until the middle of the first decade of the 2000's.

Even in those regions where the authorities were more receptive to immigrants (Belgorod and Voronezh regions), conflict situations arose between IDPs and the local population. At that point, it became apparent that refugee and IDP resettlement strategies adopted by the FMS of Russia were ineffective: dense concentrations of IDPs helped to create barriers between the IDPs and the host population and the social exclusion of forced migrants.

An additional factor, which contributed to policy transformations affecting forced migrants was that the Federal authorities discovered that IDPs, as with forced migrants, who had come to Russia were supporters of political opponents, primarily communists and national-patriots, which significantly contributed to the authorities' cautious attitude toward assisting them in the future.

Policy Transformation toward Asylum Seekers and IDPs

In the course of the "Geneva Process" (at a high-level meeting in Spring 1996, participating states established general principles and agreements, as well as developed standards on an implementation process), Russia set out to bring national legislation in line with the UN Convention on Refugees⁴ and came to a substantial agreement on a limited interpretation of the Federation law: "On Forced Migrants": in the Geneva convention documents, forced migrants coming to Russia already possessing Russian citizenship were put into a separate category – "involuntarily displaced persons", whereas those relocating within Russia are treated as IDPs.

Therefore, now asylum seekers on Russian territory can apply for refugee status, as well as the status of a person seeking temporary asylum and having applied for political asylum (an institution which is rooted in the Soviet past.)

These respective statuses are granted under considerably stringent conditions, which have contributed to a steady decline in the number of asylum seekers. At the end of 2012, 2,993 people had temporary asylum, mostly from Georgia (1,729 people) and Afghanistan (1,022 people.) Refugee status is granted very rarely: from 2007 to April 2012, 961 people received it, predominantly from Afghanistan (628 people) and Georgia (129 people); As of December 1st, 2012, 763 refugees were registered (FMS 2013; 43). Political asylum is granted in exceptional cases: from 2007 to April of 2012, 15 people received it, 7 of whom were from Uzbekistan.

Policy tightening for the granting of asylum is also set out for the coming years: according to the RF FMS plans, in 2014-2015, the number of people receiving temporary asylum, will be 800-900 people per year, refugee status – 180-200 people, political asylum – 1 person. (FMS 2013; 154). Temporary asylum will be provided to 36-40% of applicants and around 7% of applicants will be recognized as refugees.

The number of IDPs will be reduced from 35 to 34 thousand people, however housing will be provided to less than 500 people, and 9 people will receive compensation for lost homes in Chechnya

⁴ Formally modified version from 1997, but essentially the new law "On Refugees" (FL, 1997).

(FMS 2013; 151). The fulfillment of the government's obligations to displaced persons has been lingering for many years.

Russian Discourses

In the first half of the 1990's, forced migrant challenges become key for researchers and an important element of public debate. In the 2000's, asylum seekers, refugees and displaced persons have practically disappeared from academic discourse. If in the 1990's the main body of academic publications on the problem of migration was devoted to forced migrants, then in the 2000's these publications were extremely rare.⁵

The academic community's disinterest in the problem of refugees, asylum seekers, and IDPs, can be explained not only by the reduction in the scale of forced migration and its relevance, but also by the lack of real progress in solving the problems that were identified back in the 1990's, such as: the fulfillment of obligations to IDPs (particularly from the zone of the Ingush-Ossetian and Chechen conflicts), the resolution of problems with the status of asylum seekers – primarily Afghans, the majority of whom have long been integrated into Russian society.

Public discussion focuses on the ethnic background of migrants and compared with the problems of millions of working migrants, tens of thousands of asylum seekers take the second place.

Social Exclusion of Refugees, Displaced Persons, and Asylum Seekers

While the number of social challenges, combined with the presence of a contingent of refugees, IDPs, and persons who have received temporary asylum, not only did not cease to be relevant, other challenges appeared. If before the main problems were social-economic, due to lack of housing, jobs, and access to social security, then currently the problems that come to the fore are related to the social exclusion of forced migrants, and the lack of attention and real assistance from the government and civil society institutions.

The RF FMS arranges a limited number of housing opportunities for refugees and persons seeking asylum: three centers of temporary housing that can accommodate 145 persons, almost half of which are in the remote area of the Perm District ("Ocher" Center), away from places of employment. The creation of this kind of isolation creates additional tension between the host population and forced migrants, and does not contribute to the adaptation and integration of asylum seekers on the Russian territory.

Refugees, persons who have received temporary asylum and IDPs who are trying to solve problems on their own without government assistance, renting housing and working— most often in the informal economy, experience no fewer problems.

Russian non-governmental organizations, which provided them with assistance in the 1990's with significant support from international organizations, are scaling down their work since the government has a skeptical attitude towards their activities, believing that they are political in nature. The winding down of support from the Russian NGOs in the absence of a special state program for the adaptation and integration of forced migrants exacerbates the problems of their social exclusion.

⁵ In the annotated bibliography of literature for the period of 1992-1999, publications on refugees are in a similar situation and asylum seekers comprise the main portion of scientific research (Migrations 2000; 309-346.) In the publication from 2013 in the three-volume anthology on migration research for 2000-2012 there was no section for an article on forced migration, but a list of scientific publications on relevant themes is ten times shorter and presents basically a few works from the beginning of the 2000's. (Anthology 2013; 239-244)

Conclusion

The resolution of problems for asylum seekers, refugees, and IDPs encounters resistance, due to the cautious attitude of Federal government authorities, state governments, local governments, and the host population. The prevalence of a xenophobic attitude, pressure of non-governmental organizations that work with asylum seekers, and the weakness of civil society institutions create a distorted picture of the unimportance of this contingent's problems, and weakens the potential readiness of the government and society for emergency situations related to the flow of asylum-seekers.

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