

Analysis

Immigration and Russian Migration Policy: Debating the Future

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Summary

While war refugees and returnees dominated immigration to Russia during the 1990s, in recent years, most immigrants are laborers who want to benefit from the Russian economic upturn. These immigrants face extremely poor working conditions and they are socially ostracized by the vast majority of the Russian population. At the same time, immigration could prove to be the solution to the country's demographic problems, countering the decline of its working population. So far, Russian migration policy has not formulated a convincing response to this dilemma.

Introduction

The façade of heated political debates over perspectives for immigration and migration policy disguises a clash of views over the future of Russia. The advocates of immigration – liberals and pragmatists – have in mind the long-term economic, demographic, and political interests of the country. Since Russia's population shrinks by 700,000 people every year; immigration can play a vital role in balancing the shortfall of working-age Russians, maintaining the potential for economic development, supporting the stability of individual regions, and guaranteeing national security.

Their opponents, on the other hand – Communists and “national patriots” – refer to the social, religious, and ethnic consequences of immigration. Since they are attuned to socio-cultural aspects, their emphasis is on the challenges and threats posed by the current situation, and they advocate a hard-line migration policy. In the context of their isolationist stance, they support the notion of submission to an overarching “Russian” or “Orthodox Christian” culture.

Discussions on migration policy boil down to the following dilemma: Social stability can be secured for the immediate future at the price of increasing long-term social, economic, political, and demographic problems; or an attempt can be made to find solutions for long-term problems, at the risk of increasing social tensions in the near future.

The Evolution of post-Soviet Russian immigration

Three waves of immigration can be discerned in post-Soviet Russia. The first, in the early 1990s, consisted of immigrants who had been forced to flee from war and conflict zones in the post-Soviet space, as well as returnees who had emigrated from Russia and were now in a hurry to leave the former Soviet republics. At the peak of this development (1992–1995),

about one million immigrants returned to Russia annually from the CIS states and the Baltic republics. Most of the immigrants who resettled in Russia after the dissolution of the USSR arrived during this period (see Fig. 1 and Fig. 2, p 6). A significant proportion of these immigrants were given refugee or resettler status (the latter providing Russian citizenship).

In the second half of the 1990s, the number of immigrants gradually declined (see Fig. 1 on p. 6). The number of refugees dropped to almost zero. Among the immigrants of the second wave, the number of social and economic refugees increased.

The third wave of migration, which arrived in the first decade of the new millennium, can be divided into two sub-currents that were disparate in terms of size, direction, and composition: Immigrants who came to Russia for permanent residence, and migrant laborers who only intended to stay in Russia for a short period.

The number of new immigrants subsequently stabilized at the relatively low figure of 120,000 to 180,000 per year. The majority of these are ethnic Russians or so-called “Russian speakers,” members of historic ethnic minorities within Russia. However, the number of immigrants from indigenous ethnic groups in the CIS countries is increasing. The majority of immigrants are returnees from Kazakhstan (31% of all immigrants in 2005) and the other Central Asian countries (32%).

On the other hand, the number of labor migrants with only temporary residence in Russia has markedly increased. Currently, there are approximately between 3 and 3.5 million labor migrants permanently available to the Russian labor market, with seasonal fluctuations ranging between 4 and 4.5 million in the spring and summer and 2 and 2.5 million in the winter. The majority of them are members of ethnic groups from the CIS countries; in Russia, migrants from the Central Asian states are particularly well represented, as are Azeris and Ukrainians. One in five

migrants comes from the Southeast Asian countries, China, or other countries in the “Far Abroad.”

Migrants’ motives

The political causes that drove immigration in the previous decades have lost all practical significance in the new millennium. Economic motives have now become the dominating factors. Russia’s dynamically growing economy makes it a popular place to work and live for many people in neighboring countries. The immigrants are ultimately motivated by Russia’s relatively better social and economic situation and higher standard of living.

For labor migrants, the differences between average wages in their home countries and in Russia are especially persuasive. In 2005, for example, the wage level in Russia was 11 times higher than in Tajikistan and five times higher than in Kyrgyzstan and Uzbekistan. Another important factor is the high level of unemployment in most CIS states: In Armenia, there are more than 100 applicants for each job vacancy; in Georgia, more than 20; in Russia, however, there are less than three (Figure 3 on p. 7 gives an overview).

Russia offers many job opportunities, making it the central point of attraction for labor migrants from CIS states. Russia is also attractive to these migrants because they are already familiar with the Russian language and way of life. Furthermore, the common traditions and shared cultural heritage of the Soviet Union still have a lasting effect even 15 years after its collapse, frequently reinforced by family ties and regular communication.

Legal status

Only officially recognized refugees (about 500 individuals) and individuals with temporary refugee status (about 1,000) enjoy clearly defined social and economic rights. Foreigners with a permanent residence permit (131,000) or a temporary permit (174,000) also technically have wide-ranging privileges, including nearly uninhibited access to the labor market. However, loopholes in the current legislation mean that in practice, many of these social rights are hard to enforce.

The majority of migrants in Russia are, however, largely disenfranchised. Up to 90 percent have no residence and/or work permits, due to fragmented legislation and a lack of clear procedures defining how to apply the law. All foreigners with temporary residence in Russia must have a work permit. However, a work permit is only issued for three months at a time; in order for it to be extended, foreigners must leave and re-enter the country. De facto, the social rights of these

migrants are reduced to medical emergency care and their children’s school education.

Economic consequences

Russia has a high demand for labor. The traditional resources of new labor – women and the rural population – were exploited decades ago. The last resource, juveniles reaching working age, is also nearly depleted: Looking forward, the natural decline in the working-age population will outpace the number of young people joining the workforce. Until recently, the population of working age people had increased in spite of the shrinking overall population numbers, thanks to a favorable age structure. However, a natural decline of the working population by 17 to 19 million can be expected by the year 2026, which corresponds to about one quarter of the workforce currently employed in the Russian economy.

Already today, some sectors of the Russian economy rely to a large extent on migrant laborers, including construction, wholesale and retail trade, public and personal services, food service, and public transportation. Migrants are required for low-paid menial, heavy, and seasonal employment that the local population has no interest in.

Because they occupy jobs that are unpopular with the local population, migrants create competition for unskilled workers on the job market. This competition is enhanced by migrants’ price-cutting: Since most of them are illegal immigrants, they settle for wages that are unacceptable for the local population. According to several studies, migrants work between 50 and 65 hours a week.

The arrival of unskilled foreign workers – 80 percent of migrants perform tasks that require no qualifications – is a disadvantage for the domestic unskilled workforce, but a boon to the rest of the Russian population, as it facilitates lower prices for goods and services and thus strengthens the competitiveness of the Russian economy.

In 2004, the total income of migrants was approximately US\$9 billion. Of this, between US\$3.5 and US\$4 billion were transferred to the migrants’ home countries, especially Azerbaijan and Ukraine (see Fig. 4 on p. 7). This year, due to higher labor costs and the surge of the ruble against the dollar, migrants’ total income could increase to US\$14 billion, and cash transfers to their home countries could reach US\$6 billion.

The working conditions of a large majority of migrants are similar to forced labor. Lacking a work and/or residence permit for Russia, they are extremely dependent on their employer. The risks that migrants

incur in Russia are often unusually high because of collaboration between unscrupulous employers and the police and because of endemic corruption. Delayed or withheld wage payments, financial penalties, withholding of personal identification cards or personal valuables, and threats of being turned over to the authorities or deportation are everyday practices. In one survey, every migrant living in Moscow and Stavropol had experienced violence or coercion.

Social ostracism of migrants: Consequences for Russian society

The absence of free access to the labor market, labor rights, social protection, and social dialog are part of the Russian reality that confronts the majority of the labor migrants, as well as a significant part of the immigrants.

The lack of dignified work, and the illegal nature of migrant employment, contribute significantly to their isolation from the host society. Another factor determining the social ostracism of migrants is the growing xenophobia which can be found in all parts of Russian society.

In Russia, where civic identity has been replaced by an ethnic one, the latter has become the defining marker for “self-other” relations. The exaggerated importance of ethnicity, which is seeping into all social relations, primarily affects the migrants. The fear of migrants is obviously based on an ethnic frame of reference.

According to a survey conducted by the Levada Center in July 2005, only 10 percent of respondents shared the view that “Russia needs migrants who come here permanently and acquire Russian citizenship,” while 15 percent thought that “Russia needs migrants who only come here to earn money,” and only 8 percent believed that “Russia needs both kinds of migrants.” Of the respondents, 57 percent were in favor of barring people from the Caucasus (including Russian citizens living in the Northern Caucasus) from residence in their city or district, while 53 percent would support a similar ban for Central Asian migrants.

The Russian population takes a hard-line stance against the social integration of migrants. A large majority of Russian citizens would like to shut migrants out from the labor market and forbid them from purchasing property in Russia. The majority of respondents would not want to have migrants as relatives or neighbors (see Tables 2 & 3 and Fig. 5 on p. 8).

The fact that the majority of the population supports administrative and other measures to prevent

the integration of foreigners creates a climate of discrimination in the labor and housing markets. Discrimination at the workplace takes the form of limited access to certain tasks and working areas, as well as discrepancies in pay and working conditions. In the housing market, discrimination is even more flagrant: Newspaper advertisements for residential space with the proviso “[Only] for rent to a Russian family” can be found in almost all regions (see Fig. 6 on p. 9).

Russian society is experiencing a social stratification of ethnic groups and an establishment of hierarchies that assigns a clearly specified social niche to migrants. Neither the majority of the population nor the traditional minorities in Russia look favorably upon attempts to leave this niche.

A social convention based on such stratification does not meet the long-term goals of sustainable development for Russian society. Such a convention, by tightly channeling social communications and relationships, only contributes to further social subdivisions with a corresponding increase of the social conflict potential, and thus undermines the emerging civil society.

The widespread discrimination against migrants and their illegal exploitation is closely linked to the way society ignores human rights violations, as well as to the erosion of social ethics and socially-accepted values.

The erratic course of migration policy

In the 1990s, Russian migration policy focused on accepting and integrating refugees and returnees. During this time, the legal foundations for migration policy were laid, creating a basis that was subsequently applied in federal migration programs supported by fairly stable and transparent financing.

However, at the turn of the year 2001–2002, Russian migration policy was subjected to a fundamental revision: The struggle against illegal migration took center stage, and the government tried to link it to crime and terrorism.

The Federal Migration Service was reorganized, transferred to the Interior Ministry, and made directly subordinate to the president’s office. The government’s main concern now was to establish a vertical axis of power that would be able to duly receive the president’s instructions, transmit them where necessary, and implement them. From 2002 on, migration policy became the president’s prerogative.

At the same time, legislation on naturalization and the legal status of foreigners was tightened. The

cancellation of the federal migration programs meant that migration policy lacked transparency and accountability, while the “power vertical” deprived the regions of their authority in this area and centralized the decision-making process.

The results of the policies pursued during 2002–2004 are deplorable. The number of migrants with uncertain legal status has increased continuously. This policy has not only failed to meet expectations in the struggle against illegal migration, but has also given rise to new problems that have hampered the Russian economy.

Having failed conspicuously, this policy was once again reviewed in March 2005 when the Security Council, chaired by the president, decided to liberalize and realign the guidelines in order to make Russia attractive for migrants.

Currently, the basic tents of migration policy are being revised, and a draft law is in the works that would make it easier for foreigners to register for temporary residence and would facilitate migrants’ access to the Russian labor market. A program is being developed to support the voluntary resettlement of Russia’s traditional ethnic groups.

These measures would appear to be praiseworthy, but there is a catch: First of all, the draft legislation states that the primary intention is to attract skilled specialists from abroad – at a time when the Russian economy mainly requires unskilled labor as well as highly qualified experts. Secondly, the intention is to draw on ethnic Russians, even though the migration potential of this group is limited to 6–7 million people. Third, it is assumed that favorable conditions will be offered to these fellow Russians: Their relocations costs will be covered, jobs and infrastructure will be created, apartments will be built, etc. The cost of absorbing and integrating one million immigrants is approximately 170 billion rubles – funds that are

equivalent to the amount earmarked for all federal programs annually.

In bringing about change in Russia’s migration policy, one important factor is time: Because of the parliamentary elections at the end of 2007 and the presidential elections in early 2008, any change of course will have to be implemented quickly. The coming winter marks a “point of no return”; it will be dangerous to attempt such a policy shift at a later point, on the eve of elections.

Remnants of the Soviet heritage

Contemporary Russian discourse emphasizes immigration’s negative aspects while rarely mentioning its blessings. Conceptions of migration processes and their regulation, both in the government and among the broader population, are to a large extent rooted in the Soviet experience. Relations with migrants are shaped by the closed nature of Soviet society and by the fact that there has been no established tradition of immigration to Russia for the past 150 years.

A prominent legacy of the Soviet era is the faith in administrative measures (e.g. the *propiska*, a residence permit that is a holdover from the Soviet era) that may have been effective in a different time but are no longer useful today. Likewise, the belief that political and administrative considerations should take precedence over economic factors remains strong. The underestimation of new developments in the Russian economy, especially of the constantly increasing need for migrant labor, coincide with an over-reliance on the feasibility of regulating the flow of migrants. The main Soviet era legacy, though, may be the obvious lack of appreciation for the role that integration could play in ameliorating the negative consequences of ethno-social stratification and the exclusion of migrants.

(Translated from German by Christopher Findlay)

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