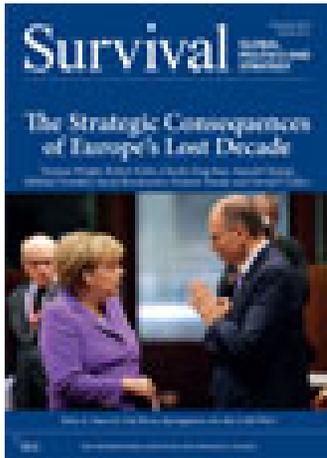


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Russia's Migration Crisis

Ben Judah

It sometimes seems that Russia's authorities, no longer able to export governments abroad, have imported a whole new stratum of subject peoples to labour on their building sites, wait their tables and sweep their streets. Moscow would collapse without its migrants: the platoons of Kyrgyz who sweep away the snow at night, the barracks of Uzbeks who empty onto the scaffolding every morning and the tens of thousands of Tajiks who drive unregistered night taxis.

Historians will judge uncontrolled mass migration to be Russian President Vladimir Putin's most profound legacy. His regime has absent-mindedly reconfigured Russia's demographic composition. The country is now the world's most popular destination for migrants after the United States. In 2000 it was already home to at least 12 million immigrants, mostly ethnic Russians who have since acquired citizenship. Russia has since acquired a gigantic shadow economy of over 11m labour migrants and seasonal workers.¹

Migration has been a stroke of luck for Russia. It has lessened the impact of a terrible demographic crisis. Population collapse from 149m in 1992 to 142m today would have been drastically worse without this influx of workers.² The first migrant wave was easy to absorb, as it comprised Russian speakers from ex-Soviet republics 'returning' to the motherland. But the sources of migration have changed over the past decade. In the early

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1990s, 90% of those acquiring citizenship were returning ethnic Russians. Today, their share of the total is less than 30%.³

The true extent of Russian migration is even greater than these statistics would suggest. Official immigration figures only account for those who acquired Russian citizenship, and exclude temporary and unregistered workers. Russia's Federal Migration Service estimates that there are 11m foreigners in the country, only 1.5m of whom are working legally.⁴ This is because both employers and migrants themselves have every incentive to remain in the shadows. Even officials admit that they have no idea how high the true figure could be.

Russia's migrant addiction

Russia has farmed out its dirtiest jobs. Whole sectors of the economy have become addicted to cheap, unregistered migrant labour. This has been a deliberate strategy to maximise profits through avoidance of the higher wages that ethnic Russians demand. Big state employers and businesses have ignored the alternative: increasing productivity with fewer, better-paid workers and modernised equipment.

Construction work, even on the site of the upcoming Sochi Olympics, has been monopolised by Central Asian labourers, with employers running language-segregated teams and shifts in Tajik, Kyrgyz and Uzbek. In big cities, a migrant workforce with a similar ethnic makeup dominates in the logistics, kiosk, shelf-stocking, waitressing and wholesale markets. In rural areas, migrants work as seasonal pickers and tillers.

They are serf labour. Corrupt employers prefer them to native Russians. Not only do many of them – as Muslims – abstain from drinking but, working illegally and barely able to speak Russian, they cannot stand up for themselves. This allows employers to pay them over 80% less than native Russians, and to break every rule in the Russian labour code. Employers import and dump Central Asians in horrendous conditions. It is not uncommon to find one hundred of them crammed into a single apartment or even a cellar. Documents and other forms of identification are often confiscated, tying workers to their employers, and cases of slavery are often reported.

This is only Russia's second migration wave. Although the Russian population has temporarily stabilised and its workforce slightly increased – as those born in the baby boom of the hopeful early Gorbachev years have started work – this is only a short reprieve. Demographers project that the labour force is likely to shrink from over 100m to 86m by 2030.⁵ This is because of a 'missing generation' that resulted from the diminished birth rate of the 1990s and the coming retirement of the post-war baby boomers.

Without modernisation, increased productivity and higher wages, Russia will have no choice but to import ever more workers to fill the gap. This means that labour imports from the predominantly Islamic states of the Caucasus and Central Asia will have to reach gigantic proportions. There is little doubt that Russia's construction and retail barons prefer this course. Investors estimate that as much as half of their profits come from employing cheap migrant labour.⁶

This means that, by 2050, Russia will be unrecognisable. Leading demographer Anatoly Vishnevsky estimates that, based on the projected reduction of the native labour force, around 15% of the population will be recent immigrants by 2025, rising to 40% by mid-century.⁷

Moscow is therefore in a bind. Russia needs to become a multicultural society to survive economically but, ever since 1991, the ideological justification for dissolving the Soviet Union was the aim of building a 'Russian nation-state'. Ominously, the Putin regime has chosen to sponsor a chauvinistic variant of Russian orthodoxy just as the Islamic population of Russia is set to rise to 20% of the total by 2020.

Worse still for Moscow, almost all Russians view Chechens, Dagestanis and other North Caucasians not as fellow citizens of the Russian Federation but as foreign immigrants. Millions have moved to Russia's cities away from the lawlessness and unemployment of the south. The brutalisation of North Caucasian society caused by decades of wars and insurgency means that many such migrants are more prone to violence. Hardened North Caucasian criminal syndicates have increasingly taken over mafia-controlled areas of the black market from weaker ethnic Russian groups.

Mass migration on this scale has been a shock to the Russian working class. Despite a long history as a multinational empire, Russia was never

a multicultural society. Soviet Russia imported labour from Belarus and Ukraine to its gigantic construction sites but the peoples of the Caucasus and Central Asia were exoticised and little known. Russian cities have for many years had a smattering of Jews, Georgians and Armenians – battered into conformity – but working-class people would have been unlikely to ever meet an Uzbek or a Tajik.

The rise of migration politics

Russia's migration luck is running out. The Kremlin appears to be losing control of the migration politics that the wave of immigrants has induced. It is not only liberals and democrats who increasingly protest against the Putin regime. Nationalists now account for the majority of working-class opposition activism. This is because Russia is suffering from flashes of a low-level race war.

Beginning in the northern city of Kondopoga in 2006, mass brawls between Russians and migrants (usually Chechens and Caucasians) have plunged whole districts into anarchy. These racial clashes have been increasing ever since; riot police have been forced to restore order in more than a dozen towns and villages in central Russia, the south and the Urals.

The riots reached Moscow in 2010. The murder of an ethnic Russian football fan – allegedly by North Caucasians protected by the police — triggered a massive race riot beneath the Kremlin's walls. Over 7,000 protesters charged the square, beating up migrants, letting off flares and tussling with the police.⁸ Unnerved by such large-scale unrest among the working class, led by nationalists, a sector Vladimir Putin had long believed loyal to him, the authorities gave mixed signals. There were arrests and detentions but Putin also visited the grave of the murdered fan.

Russia's leader laying flowers at this grave set a dangerous precedent. It gave the signal that rioting was a way to make the authorities respond to low-level racial violence. Accordingly, small vigilante groups inspired by the 2010 riot began to spring up around Moscow. Their mission was to clear the streets of migrant drug dealers and drive out the ubiquitous migrant squatters in the basements of high-rise residences.

By mid-2011, the two most active groups, Moscow Shield and Bright Rus, were up and running with nightly raids. The authorities have tried to infiltrate and control these organisations, supplying them with access to extensive police contacts, friendly ministers and the migration service. But this has only had the effect of legitimising the now nightly raids that these groups are unwilling to stop.

The growth of vigilantism coincided with the rise of Alexei Navalny. Although Russia's pre-eminent opposition leader is best known in the West as an online anti-corruption fighter, in Russia he is as well known for being the country's most famous partisan of ending uncontrolled mass migration. Navalny argues that Putin's open borders are leading to the 'Islamisation' of Russia and importing Caucasian mafias and Central Asian drug peddlers.

Navalny increasingly sets the agenda in Russian politics. He pushed corruption to the centre of the 2011–12 protest movement. This triggered a defensive 'purge of the elite' and the Kremlin's own cynical 'anti-corruption drive'. Navalny lives in the working-class Moscow suburb of Marino and, unlike other democrats, is keenly aware of the increasing white underclass radicalisation against migrants. This led Navalny to change his focus in 2013. His blog has recently concentrated more on exposés of corruption in Chechnya, anger at Caucasian mafias and laments that suburban schools are now full of migrant children.

His ethnic politics set the tone for the 2013 Moscow mayoral campaign. The capital is severely overcrowded and home to at least 2.5m migrants. Moscow's pull for Russians from other regions has meant that competition for housing has emerged in the city. Furthermore, middle-class people have been forced to live in cheaper immigrant areas that they no longer regard as being Russian.

Frightened of Navalny, every party ran on a platform of curtailing illegal immigration. Putin's candidate, Sergei Sobyenin, theatrically established illegal detention camps outside Moscow and boasted of having cleansed the city of unregistered workers. He even claimed that the city could function with 'only 200,000 migrants'.⁹ Even the liberal rival to Navalny, Sergei Mitrokhin, campaigned with the slogan 'stop making Moscow Central Asian'.

Navalny is pushing for the establishment of a visa regime with the Caucasus and Central Asia. He argues that only this can both reduce overall migration and break corrupt sectors addicted to abused migrant labour. Polling shows that 84% of Russians now agree with him.¹⁰ Navalny correctly claims that only when Russia has securitised borders with the Caucasus and Central Asia can the middle-class dream of free travel to the European Union become a reality.

Migration politics has gone mainstream. In such circumstances, it is no surprise that an outbreak of ethnic violence struck Moscow in October 2013. The murder of an ethnic Russian, allegedly by a man from the North Caucasus, triggered anarchy in the decrepit suburb of Biryulyovo. Angry locals linked up with football fans and vigilante nationalists to storm a marketplace dominated by Caucasians and housing Central Asians in unsanitary conditions. Clashes with riot police ensued as hundreds were beaten up and migrant property destroyed.

Mass migration is never peaceful. Importing some of the poorest, mostly rural, peasants from the Caucasus and Central Asia into violent, deprived neighbourhoods in Moscow is a recipe for confrontation. Local online forums abound with stories of frequent knife fights and brawls. Rivalry, especially over women but also over who runs housing estates and local drug turf, has become intense.

This is not strikingly different, however, from events in the poorer parts of London during the 1950s and 1960s, where migrant communities were first established. The difference is the institutional framework within which mass migration took place. Russia's institutions – unlike those of migrant nations such as Britain, France and Germany – are utterly rotten.

This has left the ethnic Russian majority feeling frightened, hopeless and intimidated. They are unable to influence events because those with an interest in importing and shabbily housing ever larger numbers of migrants can bribe the police to turn a blind eye. The culprits vary, but include Russian developers, construction teams, supermarkets and even state agencies. Those tasked with controlling migration – the border force, the police and the Federal Migration Service – instead profit from it by demanding extortionate bribes for access.

Worse still, migrants arrive from some of the most clannish parts of the world; Chechens and Kyrgyz are notorious for fighting in clans, and face off in market brawls with atomised ethnic Russian men, often single children with only a few close friends to back them up. When a fight starts, the ethnic Russians almost always lose. Turning to the police for support, they often find that officers have been bribed to ignore their complaints by the powerful Caucasian mafia groups.

The Eurasian immigration union

Russia's rising migration politics risks turning into a disaster for the Kremlin. The vicious circle of corruption, migration and poor policing threatens to ignite ever more race riots unless it can be broken. Putin faces three problems. Firstly, every anarchic outbreak undermines his claim to having brought stability to Russia. Secondly, such events steadily push a working class hostile to migration further towards the opposition. Finally, this chaos ominously contradicts his goal of reuniting the broken Soviet Union in a Russian-led Eurasian Union.

This planned union would ensure permanent open borders with Central Asia and the Caucasus. Russian diplomats see this as a high priority. They believe that the country cannot be considered a great power without a sphere of influence. To create one in its former colonies, Moscow needs to maintain the supremacy of the Russian language with similar education systems, labour migration and elite education. This requires a visa-free travel area.

Putin openly encourages mass immigration, having said earlier this year that 'we are waiting for such people of reproductive age'.¹¹ Plans are afoot to dramatically ease the process of acquiring citizenship for Russian speakers across former Soviet republics.

Russia is conforming to a historical pattern. Both Britain and France attempted to maintain free-travel areas with their former colonies after ceding control of these states. Following a violent public backlash due to uncontrolled mass migration, however, London and Paris were forced to create visa regimes. Later, Britain and France were forced to become multicultural and accepting societies to integrate the huge numbers of migrants that they had acquired from former colonies.

London and Paris are now able to choose whether to accept mass immigration. Their economies do not depend on it in the same way that Russia's does. The reduction in the country's labour force in coming decades will place the most stress on its manufacturing sector. Reducing labour migration would mean that it has no choice but to shrink.

It is also true that Russians no longer want many of the jobs primarily done by migrants. The Kronstadt district of St Petersburg tested the hypothesis that better salaries for cleaners could replace Central Asian migrants with natives. Despite providing accommodation and higher salaries, they found it extremely difficult to recruit 17 native cleaners, and may have been unable to cope without migrants to fill the extra 32 places that the winter snows require.¹²

The Kremlin is currently deploying contradictory policies: chauvinistic patriotism to buttress its flagging support, alongside massive labour imports to support the Russian economy. Meanwhile, corrupt institutions are exacerbating working-class anger. This leaves Putin in an uncomfortable position. Unless he moves to establish a visa regime with the Caucasus and Central Asia soon, he risks ceding the immigration issue to the opposition in the name of the Eurasian Union. His second option is to give up on reuniting the empire for good.

Notes

- 1 'Russia Has World's 2nd Largest Number of Immigrants – UN Study', RIA Novosti, 12 September 2013, <http://en.ria.ru/russia/20130912/183384782.html>.
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- ¹² Alexander Kordyakov, 'Mnogo Pili, Dralis i Filosofostovali', *Kommersant Vlast*, 23 September 2013, <http://www.kommersant.ru/doc/2280582/print>.