

Russia's Need for and Fear of Migrants

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Those citizens of the Commonwealth of Independent States (CIS) member states who are illegally living and working in Russia have been required to leave the country by June 15, 2021. At a meeting of the CIS Parliamentary Assembly in St. Petersburg on April 16, Alexander Gorovoy, Russian First Deputy Interior Minister, called on member states to inform their citizens because, he [warned](#), the illegal migrants will be forcibly deported and barred from entering Russia if they do not leave the country voluntarily. According to the Interior Ministry, currently the number of illegal migrants from the CIS countries in Russia is more than 1 million, and 120,000 of them are Azerbaijani citizens. By June 15, they must either return home or go to a third country. Hence this problem also concerns Azerbaijan. In this article, I have tried to examine the reasons for Russia's ultimatum and how its migration policy has changed in recent years.

Following the warning from a Russian government representative, the move was seen by some as pressure on those CIS countries which have tense relations with Russia. Indeed, given the Putin government's policy in the post-Soviet space, it is hard to believe that it is not using this issue as a means of pressure. The announcement of this decision at a time of growing tensions between Ukraine and Russia and a dispute over the *Iskander* missiles in Azerbaijani-Russian relations also raises suspicions in this regard. (There are 152,000 illegal Ukrainian migrants in Russia.) However, the decision is not new – it was made a year ago on April 18, 2020. A decree signed by President Putin regarding the coronavirus pandemic allowed migrant workers living legally in Russia to stay in the country until June 15, 2020. By a presidential decree [signed](#) on September 23, this period was extended until

December 15, and by a decree [signed](#) on December 17, until June 15, 2021. That is, the current demand of the Russian government is based on a presidential decree made a year ago. The fact that the majority of illegal migrants are from Uzbekistan (about 332,000 people) and Tajikistan (about 247,000 people), who have no problems in their relations with Russia, also raises doubts about the claims that the rationale behind the decision is to exert political pressure.

Putin's decrees, which have been extended several times, have allowed some illegal migrants to obtain legal status. Thus, in 2020, more than 3.3 million labor migrants, including those working illegally, received [legal status](#). About 2.2 million of them applied for extension of temporary stay, 123,000 for visa extension, 55,000 for work permits and 921,000 for *patents* (see below).

According to Russian law, citizens of CIS countries, i.e. those who have the right to enter the country without a visa, must obtain a *work permit* or a *patent (license)* to engage in labor activity. The main difference between a work permit and a patent is that while a work permit allows individuals to work for legal persons (companies, enterprises, organizations) and individual entrepreneurs, the patent allows them to work only for physical persons (household chores, personal driver, cook, etc.). The labor of foreign citizens with a patent may not be used in entrepreneurial or income-generating activities. The main [advantage](#) of a patent is that it is relatively easy to obtain, which also gives you the right to both live and work. But at the same time, to get a patent, you need to pass an exam on the Russian language, Russian history, and Russian legislation. The patent is issued for a period of 1-3 months and can be extended for a maximum of 1 year, after which a migrant must leave the country. In order to obtain a [work permit](#), a foreign citizen must first find an employer, then prepare various documents and submit them to government agencies.

Russia's Need for Migrants

The Russian Federation, the world's largest country in terms of area, is thinly populated. The country is in dire need of manpower, especially at a time when the population is declining and a demographic crisis is beginning. According to the Federal State Statistics Service (*Rosstat*), the overall mortality rate in Russia in 2020 increased by [18%](#) annually (323,800 people). Undoubtedly, COVID-19 played a significant role in this growth. According to *Rosstat*, 162,249 out of 323,800 people died of the coronavirus, while unofficial data show that the number of deaths from the coronavirus is much higher. However, the demographic decline in Russia has become a trend over the past three years, as the population [decreased](#) by about 99,700 in 2018 and about 35,600 in 2019. In other words, even without the coronavirus, the death rate began to exceed birth rate. In 2020, the birth rate fell in 78 federal units, the number of deaths increased in 62 federal units, and last year Russia experienced its largest population [decline](#) in the last 15 years. The decrease was by about 510,000 people. As of January 1, 2021, the population of Russia is close to 146,238,000 people. Migration compensated for the decline in population by only 15.9%. The number of migrants decreased by about 168,300 or 64.9%.

Article 1 (a) of the [decree](#) signed by President Putin in May 2018 *On national goals and strategic objectives for the development of the Russian Federation until 2024* sets a task for the government to ensure sustainable natural population growth. However, it is already known that it is impossible to achieve this task. The Russian government [predicts](#) that the population will continue to decline over the next four years and will only grow in 2030. According to the United Nations, by 2050 the population of Russia will [decrease](#) to 132.7 million.

All these suggest that Russia's need for migrant workers will grow in the coming years. Currently, the Russian labor market

(especially the construction and agricultural sectors) is facing a serious shortage of workers as a result of the pandemic. Despite the rise in monthly wages in the construction industry to RUB 90,000, Russian citizens do not want to work in construction. For this reason, the Ministry of Construction has prepared [proposals](#) to attract labor migrants to Russia in a simplified format. Deputy Prime Minister Marat Khusnullin acknowledged that 1.5 million migrants had left the country and that the shortage of labor resources was dangerous. First Deputy Minister of Agriculture Dzhambulat Khatuov also [requested](#) government help in attracting foreign workers. Khatuov noted that local residents do not want to work in the fields. There is a need for about half a million workers in this industry. Although Dmitry Medvedev, the deputy chairman of the Russian Security Council, supports the simplified recruitment of migrant workers, he [said](#) that the Russian economy is more interested in inviting highly qualified personnel.

Paradigm Shift in Migration Policy

In October 2018, the President of Russia signed a [decree](#) *On the Framework of State Migration Policy for 2019-2025*. However, an earlier [policy](#), which was approved in 2012, should have been in force until 2025. The adoption of the new policy before the expiration of the previous one can be explained by the fact that Russia felt the urgent need to make changes in public policy in this area.

The 2012 document focused more on the protection of migrants' rights and freedoms, explaining the problem of illegal migration as resulting from the imperfection of Russian legislation and the complicated procedures for obtaining status for migrants. In the new policy, however, we can see two fundamental approaches to the issue:

- *First, the problems and threats that migration flows can create;*

– Second, the protection of Russian identity and the dominance of Russian culture

Article 10 of the Policy states that “the intensive migration flow from the countries of the Middle East and North Africa to Europe (...) causes negative socio-economic processes in European states, and also contributes to the penetration of members of criminal, terrorist and extremist organizations into these states. Such negative manifestations can become a threat both for the Russian Federation and for neighboring countries.” In other words, the events in Syria and Libya and the influx of refugees from these countries to Europe have prompted Russia to strengthen its security measures and the border regime, and to reconsider its legislation. On the other hand, the social behavior of migrants, the frequent occurrence of their names in criminal cases, is one of the problems of concern to the Russian government and the public. According to the [Russian Interior Ministry](#), the number of crimes committed by migrants in January 2021 increased by 6.1% compared to the same period last year. In the same month, about 3,300 crimes were committed in Russia by citizens of other countries, as well as stateless persons. Crimes against migrants also increased by 18.4% with about 1,400 crimes registered. Dmitry Medvedev’s [statement](#) in November that the stay of migrants in Russia due to the pandemic could lead to an increase in crime also shows that the Russian government is concerned about the situation.

However, it seems that the main concern is not with the crimes committed by the migrants, but their impact on the Russian cultural environment. Article 14 of the Migration Policy states that “the goal (...) is also to protect and preserve the Russian culture, the Russian language and the historical and cultural heritage of the peoples of Russia, which form the basis of its cultural (civilizational) code.” Article 15 sets out the state’s overall view of migration policy:

“The natural increase of the population should remain the main

source replenishing the population of the Russian Federation and providing the national economy with labor resources. Migration policy is an auxiliary means of resolving demographic problems and related economic problems. It should be directed towards the creation of a favorable regime for the voluntary immigration to Russia of persons (including those who had emigrated) who are able to organically integrate into a system of positive social relations and become full members of Russian society. Nevertheless, while maintaining a reasonable balance of state, social, and private interests, it is important to preserve the openness of the Russian Federation to those foreign nationals who do not intend to remain indefinitely in Russia, or for their children to do so, or to fully integrate into Russian society, but rather see Russia as a country with favorable conditions for the fulfillment of their economic, social, and cultural needs, observe the demands of the legislation of the Russian Federation, treat with due care its environment, natural resources, material wealth, and items of cultural value, and respect the diversity of the regional and ethnocultural lifestyles of the population."

In other words, the policy states that Russian and Russian-speaking migrants are more desirable for the state, because there is no problem in the integration of this category of people into society. Others, nevertheless, can temporarily work and live in Russia by obeying the local laws and respecting the values of the Russian people.

In 2018, along with the Migration Policy, another document, the National Policy Strategy, was amended. Putin signed a [decree](#) *On amendments to the state national policy strategy of the Russian Federation until 2025, approved on December 19, 2012*. This document considers illegal migration a threat to national security. The strategy introduces the notion of a *universal Russian identity* based on the preservation of Russian cultural dominance. We see that the Russian state rejects multiculturalism and takes the dominance of Russian

culture as a fundamental value in its policy of preserving the integrity of the Federation and regulating interethnic relations.

Speaking at a meeting of the Council on Inter-Ethnic Relations on March 30, President Putin expressed his [concerns](#) about the growing number of migrants' children in schools: "In some European countries, as well as in the United States, when the level of migrants' children reaches a certain point, locals deregister their own children from those schools. In fact, those countries have schools formed entirely of migrants' children (...) In Russia, this cannot be allowed. The number of migrants' children should be such that it allows them to adapt deeply to the Russian language environment. Not only the language, but also our values and the cultural environment in general."

According to official data, there are currently more than 10 million foreigners living in Russia and about 40 percent of them are labor migrants from the former Soviet republics. Approximately 140,000 migrant children study in Russian schools. Education Minister Sergei Kravtsov [said](#) the Ministry was developing a system to assess the individual needs of migrant children. This system will identify and eliminate the problems faced by the child in learning the Russian language and the general education program.

Conclusion

On the one hand, Russia is in dire need of migrant workers, and this article shows that the need will continue to grow in the coming years due to the demographic crisis and the reluctance of the local population to take jobs that require heavy physical labor. But on the other hand, the Russian state fears that unregulated, uncontrolled migration can lead to the spread of crime, including terrorism, human trafficking and drug addiction. That is, the state does not want to allow this need for migrant workers to cause new problems in turn. The

main reasons for the problems in this area are the mass influx of new generations of people from different cultures, namely from the CIS countries, who did not see the Soviet era and do not know Russian, and their lack of integration into the local community. These types of migrants often have conflicts with locals, as well as with each other. From this point of view, it is noteworthy that the number of crimes committed by and against the migrants have increased. It is worth recalling the [events](#) that took place in 2013 in the *Biryulyovo Zapadnoye* district of Moscow after the murder of a local resident by Azerbaijani Orkhan Zeynalov, i.e. attacks on people – as well as their work places and shops – of Caucasian and Central Asian descent.

For these reasons, Russia's new Migration Policy also addresses the issues of the socio-cultural adaptation and integration of foreign citizens. From 2015, foreigners wishing to live and work temporarily in Russia are required to take an exam on the Russian language, Russian history and the basics of local legislation. However, these and other documentation requirements, as well as the intention to avoid paying taxes, force many migrants to find work in Russia illegally.