

Ethnic Migration: A Challenge to Russian Border Security?

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Russia is one of the world's top destinations for migrants, mainly from post-Soviet states but also increasingly from elsewhere in Asia, especially China. While precise assessments differ, the number of migrants in Russia is generally estimated to be in the millions. Many temporary migrants are illegal; even more are marginalized members of Russian society. Often, migration is associated in the public mind with a rise in crime and job competition, as well as a proliferation of uncontrolled ethnic enclaves. In the last several years, survey results reflect a clear rise in tension between native-born Russians and migrants.

According to many Russian officials, politicians, journalists, and survey respondents, problems traditionally associated with ethnic migration have arisen because control over Russia's porous borders (especially those which it shares with former Soviet neighbors) is weak. Russian President Vladimir Putin, as well as the directors of the Federal Security Service (FSB) and Federal Migration Service, the governors of borderland provinces, and other state officials have all called illegal migration "a border security threat." Observers have repeatedly advocated the strengthening of Russia's border regime with the states of Central Asia and the Caucasus.

The perception that an increase in uncontrolled migration is a border security issue is, in one way, distorted. A vast majority of migrants enter Russia from former Soviet states, especially those that make up the Commonwealth of Independent States (CIS). Citizens of these states, except Georgia and Turkmenistan, can enter Russia without visas and therefore, with the exception of the few travelers who do not possess valid documents, do not need to risk illegally crossing a border. As long as this visa-free regime is in place, any offenses legal travelers commit after crossing are not directly

related to border security.

That said, it is useful to analyze the assumptions underpinning the widespread perception that uncontrolled migration is a challenge for Russian border security. This memo considers the following issues: 1) the scale of ethnic migration to Russia; 2) the number of illegal border crossings; 3) ethnodemographic trends in Russia's borderlands; 4) the relationship of migration to drug trafficking; 5) the connection between migration and transnational extremism and terrorism; and 6) the role of migrants in criminal activity in Russia's border regions.

The Scale of Migration to Russia: An “Inrush of Aliens”?

Observers often cite the influx of non-Russian or, more accurately, non-Slavic migrants from the relatively poorer states of Central Asia and the Caucasus, China, Afghanistan, and elsewhere as one of the main problems of the openness (or insufficient level of protection) of Russia's new borders. The influx of non-Slavic migrants is widely perceived as an opening for any number of threats: the seizure of vast territories by neighboring states, the undermining of dominant cultural foundations, the occupation of key economic, social, and political positions by newcomers, and a rise of violence against local populations.

Estimates of the number of illegal migrants in Russia differ, but they have risen substantially over the last ten years. From 1996 to 2001, estimates generally fluctuated between 700 thousand and 1.5 million people; by 2002, estimates had already gone as high as 20 million. Estimates by officials have increased in line. In May 2005, FSB Director Nikolai Patrushev estimated the number of illegal aliens to be 2.5 million. By the end of 2006, government officials were most often putting the figure at 10 million (especially after Putin repeatedly mentioned this number).

It is difficult to establish a reliable estimate. To estimate the number of migrants in Russia, observers often use statistics in a way that does not support their actual meaning. For example, data on the estimated total number of migrants living in Russia is often used when referring to the number of *non-Slavic* illegal aliens. Alternatively, the annual number of entries to Russia is sometimes used as the basis for determining total labor migration, ignoring the fact that many people enter and exit Russia several times a year.

In any case, estimates of 10 million or more illegal aliens (especially from Central Asia and the Caucasus alone) seem exaggerated. Reliable expert assessments put the total legal and illegal labor migration to Russia from CIS states at 3.5 to 5 million, with the largest groups coming from Ukraine (1 to 1.5 million), Azerbaijan (450-900 thousand), Tajikistan and Uzbekistan (up to 700 thousand each), Kyrgyzstan (300-350 thousand), and Moldova (200 thousand). Since independence, declining population growth rates in Central Asia and the Caucasus have led to non-Russian populations that are only around two million less than expected, if we take as a baseline growth rates in the USSR from 1979 to 1989. Taking into consideration both legal labor migration and the fact that migration to Russia is not the only explanation for this lower growth rate, one can conclude that the total number of illegal aliens in Russia from Central Asia and the Caucasus at any time is unlikely to be more than four million. If

we add to this Ukrainian, Moldovan, and Chinese migration, the total number of illegal aliens would hardly exceed five to 5.5 million. Even at this upper limit, there are not sufficient grounds to portray the situation as an uncontrolled penetration of alien elements threatening to Russian integrity or identity.

Illegal Border Crossings

Some migrants try to penetrate Russia illegally by either avoiding border checkpoints, hiding from border guards during searches, or showing forged documents. How numerous are such violations? To what extent is this problem related to insufficient security at national borders?

The greatest number of attempts to avoid border checkpoints is registered at the Caucasus sector – Russia’s borders with Azerbaijan and Georgia (in 2004, 1150 violators) – and the Northwestern sector – the border with Norway, Finland, Estonia, and Latvia (where 1400 violators were arrested in 2005). At the Caucasus border, most violators intend to visit relatives living on the other side of the border or to go further into Russia, while at the Northwestern border detainees are probably attempting to cross over into the European Union. At the Kazakh and Eastern (China, Mongolia, and North Korea) sectors, the number of foiled attempts to cross the border without inspection ranges between approximately 500 and 1,200 a year.

Generally, most trespassers are Russian citizens and/or live near the border intending to visit relatives, conduct economic activity, or carry out other commonplace activities. One can conclude, therefore, that the number of illegal border crossings alone is not dangerous for Russian national security, even assuming border guards detain only a small share of all violators. Given that Russia’s borders with the Caucasus and Kazakhstan are actively equipped, the number of such violations is not likely to increase considerably in the foreseeable future.

Many more foreigners try to enter Russia using invalid or forged documents. In 2005, there were about 185,000 such violations. The majority of such incidents, however, involve primarily procedural violations rather than any significant criminal intent on the part of violators. Even if we consider this problem a serious border security issue, its solution is in improving the quality of control at border checkpoints, not in fortifying state borders and toughening the entrance regime.

Russia may be faced with a serious problem once the 2007 EU-Russia readmission agreement is ratified and comes into effect. According to the agreement, Russia will have to incur expenses related to the deportation of illegal migrants from “third countries” trying to enter the EU from Russian territory. Presumably, only a few of these migrants, mainly from Asian and African countries, are currently registered. Once the EU begins to document such cases more carefully, expenses for their deportation could cost Russia tens of millions of dollars a year. This issue, however, has primarily a financial dimension and does not present an obvious danger to Russian citizens.

Demographic Expansion in Russia’s Borderlands?

Some observers regard as a threat the rise in the number of migrants from

neighboring countries who now reside in Russia's border regions. Results from the 2002 all-Russian census, however, do not support this concern. In a few border districts the number of native Russians was less than the number of representatives of the dominant ethnic group from a neighboring state. However, only in one region as a whole was the share of a dominant ethnic group from a neighboring country over 6 percent (in Astrakhan oblast, where the Kazakh population was registered at 14.2 percent). The 2002 census may not sufficiently reflect the situation in the regions of the Russia that border China; according to official statistics, the number of the Chinese in these regions is less than 10,000. The considerably higher estimates given by experts of 200-400 thousand people, however, probably reflect seasonal Chinese migration.

Relatedly, the potential of irredentist conflicts spurred by other countries' territorial claims on Russia is small. Russia surpasses most of its neighbors in terms of economic and military capacity, as well as political influence. Moreover, for neighboring countries, including China, economic cooperation with Russia is more profitable than the acquisition of economically unattractive territories and the risk of military conflict with Russia.

Migration and Drug Trafficking

Many Russian observers associate cross-border drug trafficking with ethnic criminal groups or even, unfortunately, certain ethnic groups more generally, especially peoples from Central Asia and the Caucasus, as well as Gypsies. To what extent are representatives of these ethnic groups (especially from Central Asia) involved in drug trafficking to Russia?

The main channel for drug trafficking into Russia is the Russia-Kazakhstan border, across which most of Russia's trafficked marijuana and, especially, heroin is brought. Currently, law enforcement structures are able to intercept only a paltry share of the drugs coming into Russia. Between 1,000 and 1,500 kilograms of heroin is arrested at Russia's borders annually. Based on conservative expert assessments that Russia's estimated 1 million heroin addicts consume on average 0.5 grams daily, the effectiveness of Russia's border protection system against heroin trafficking may be estimated at no more than 0.7 percent. According to some border guards and customs officers, in interviews with the author and other researchers, most of the illicit drugs brought through the Russia-Kazakhstan border pass through legal checkpoints.

While ethnic criminal groups play a very serious, and maybe decisive, role in the smuggling of heroin to Russia, the enormous difference between the volume of Central Asian migration to Russia (estimated at 1.5 - 2 million a year) and the number of intercepted attempts of heroin trafficking across the Russia-Kazakhstan border (approximately 200 a year) does not allow for a wholesale association of drug trafficking with any ethnic group. Even if we assume that only one percent of trafficking attempts are intercepted, this would mean that no more than two percent of Central Asian (excluding Kazakh) migrants to Russia would be involved in this criminal activity. There are no grounds to blame any ethnic group as a whole for drug trafficking into Russia.

Migration and Transnational Terrorism

Along with drug trafficking, other kinds of smuggling, and mass migration, the threat of transnational extremist penetration into Russia is one of the strongest arguments for the securitization of Russian border policy. In some cases, militants and extremists have been discovered among those trying to enter Russia (legally and illegally) from neighboring countries. Some of these cooperated with Chechen separatists and even made preparations for terrorist activities. Such activity was registered mostly across Russia's border with Azerbaijan and Georgia, where illegal centers supporting Chechen militants worked, and sometimes in territories near the Russia-Kazakhstan border.

Some observers perceive the presence of Chechen communities in some Kazakh and even Russian borderland districts, in conjunction with Russia's overall illegal migration from traditionally Muslim non-CIS countries, as a phenomenon connected *a priori* with transborder extremism. The real number of foreigners suspected of being involved in extremist activity is very small, however, while the apprehension of suspicious Russian citizens is a problem of internal, not border, security.

At the same time, the transnational dimension of this threat cannot be measured solely on the basis of quantitative indicators. The penetration into Russia of even a small group of militants through almost any CIS borders can cause a drastic hardening of the border regime, justified by the need to appease public opinion.

Crime in Border Regions

A final problem traditionally associated with mass migration is an increase in border crime. However, an analysis of law enforcement statistical data reveals that in most cases the percentage of crimes committed by foreigners is not that great. In the vast majority of border regions, this share is less than one percent. An increased crime rate among migrants may be a serious problem for some of Russia's large cities, but generally not for its borderlands.

Conclusion

In most cases, ethnic migration to the Russian Federation is related to border security only indirectly. Since citizens of most CIS states can legally enter Russia without getting visas (the vast majority of Chinese migrants arrive in Russia legally too), offenses committed by them afterwards are problems of migration policy and the maintenance of internal law and order. Ethnic migration is not closely associated with problems of drug smuggling and terrorism. In the foreseeable future, there are unlikely to be any urgent problems due to increases in the ethnodemographic balance of border regions or migrant-related crime in those regions.

The relationship between border security and illegal migration not only has an objective dimension, however, but also a subjective one. Many Russian observers perceive insufficient border security as the cause of a wide range of security threats. This perception is too widespread to be ignored in the development of border policy. In this light, even a single act of terrorism or notorious crime can give rise to serious

border policy changes. Ultimately, however, the potential result of such changes is unpredictable, as the situation will develop not only thanks to objective factors, but also subjective and irrational ones.

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