

The Kremlin plays the immigration card

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Russia is currently the world's second most popular destination country for international migrants (second only to the United States). In recent years, Russia's relatively high economic growth has attracted foreign workers from poorer neighbouring republics in Central Asia, as well as from Ukraine and Belarus. In the absence of a consistent immigration policy, the large-scale influx of immigrants has become a major issue affecting social relations in Russia. The majority of Russians oppose the arrival of both foreign workers and internal migrants from Russia's North Caucasus republics, claiming that their presence in Russia contributes to the escalation of ethnic and religious tensions, fuels organised crime and corruption, and increases competition on the labour market. As many as 70% of Russians are in favour of restricting the number of immigrants allowed into the country, calling on the government for a more stringent policy on immigration. Since the end of July the authorities have responded to these calls by carrying out a series of raids on markets and construction sites across Moscow, where most immigrants tend to find employment. The raids have led to arrests and deportations. However, these measures should not be seen as a serious attempt to deal with the problem of economic migrants in the capital, mainly because of the highly selective and staged nature of the crackdown. This, coupled with the timing of the initiative, might indicate that the raids are a part of an ongoing election campaign, particularly in the run-up to the Moscow mayoral elections scheduled for 8 September. By adopting anti-immigration rhetoric, the Kremlin is seeking both to garner support among Russian voters, who tend to be easily swayed by nationalist sentiments, and to steal the anti-immigration card from the opposition and its leader Alexei Navalny. The opposition has been calling for a clearer policy on this issue and has blamed the government for the current lack of control over migrant numbers, accusing the authorities of benefiting from the widespread corruption linked to immigration. In a broader context, the actions taken by the government are a response to the declining legitimacy of the current ruling elite. By attempting to address the immigration issue, the Kremlin is trying to restore its image as a government attentive to social problems and capable of solving them effectively.

The Kremlin's anti-immigration offensive

Since late July, public opinion in Russia has focused on the issue of illegal migration mainly because of an unprecedented campaign launched by the authorities to tackle what has been lo-

cally termed 'ethnic crime'¹. The actions the authorities have taken include large-scale raids and detentions of illegal immigrants in Moscow

¹ A term commonly used in Russia to describe a crime committed by an immigrant.

markets. The decision to launch the campaign was taken after an incident at a Moscow market during which a member of the Dagestani diaspora attacked a police officer². Commenting on the incident, President Vladimir Putin said that the blame for the attack lay with the police, who have been turning a blind eye to the presence of illegal immigrants and have agreed to ignore 'ethnic crimes' in exchange for bribes. Putin called for decisive action to root out such practices. In response to the President's call, Interior Minister Vladimir Kolokoltsev, launched³ a nationwide campaign aimed at deporting migrants working in Russia illegally, and at preventing police officers from taking part in illegal schemes linked to people smuggling⁴. At the same time, criminal charges were brought against several officers suspected of facilitating illegal immigration. As a result of the campaign, over 2000 foreign workers have been detained. Due to a lack of places in Moscow's immigration removal centres, many of the detainees were being held in a special tent camp. Following the raids, Russia's Federal Migration Service (FMS) announced that it has drafted a new law which paves the way for the establishment of 83 new detention centres for illegal migrants awaiting deportation, and added that it was planning to increase the number of FMS officers by more than 4500 people⁵. This has not been the only campaign against illegal immigrants mounted in Moscow in recent times; a few weeks earlier the Moscow authorities, led by former mayor Sergei Sobyenin, carried out a special operation code-named Zaslou-16, which aimed to locate and detain illegal immi-

grants involved in criminal activity. The campaign was widely reported in the media, and the city authorities launched a special hotline for local residents to report places where illegal immigrants might be staying.

The recent anti-immigration campaigns in Moscow were designed as special operations and were conducted on direct orders from the Kremlin. However, the manner in which they were carried out suggests that these were only temporary measures, designed mainly for show, and that the subsequent detentions targeted specific ethnic groups. The fact that the operations were taken ad hoc is reflected, for example, in the lack of sufficient space in local immigration removal centres, and the fact that the makeshift tent camp put up by the authorities does not have a legal basis. When pressed on the issue, the Interior Ministry admitted that the legal status of the tent camp had yet to be determined⁷. Meanwhile, a bias against certain

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ethnic groups can be seen in the fact that the majority of the detainees are Vietnamese citizens, even though the largest group of immigrants in Russia is made up of newcomers from the Caucasus and Central Asia, and it is their presence that is of most concern to the local population. Because of the strong clan relations among this group of immigrants, they are also more likely to become involved in organised crime. In addition, unlike the flow of migrants from the majority of CIS member states⁸,

² <http://lenta.ru/news/2013/07/28/case>

³ The raids were carried out on the basis of a verbal order issued by the Minister of the Interior, <http://echo.msk.ru/news/1125628-echo.html>

⁴ In Russia, these practices have given rise to a whole service sector which includes the physical aspects of people smuggling, the provision of counterfeit documents, residential registration, and occasionally also 'protection' in exchange for bribes.

⁵ Currently Russia has 21 temporary immigration removal centres, run by the Interior Ministry. From 1 January 2014 the centres will be managed by the Federal Migration Service.

⁶ <http://www.ridus.ru/news/97129/>

⁷ <http://izvestia.ru/news/555146>

⁸ Russia offers visa-free travel for holders of passports issued by Armenia, Azerbaijan, Belarus, Kazakhstan, Moldova, Ukraine and Uzbekistan. The exception among the CIS countries is Turkmenistan, whose citizens do require a visa to enter Russia.

the influx of migrants from Vietnam can be more easily controlled, since Vietnamese nationals must secure a visa before entering Russia. It is therefore clear that the authorities have deliberately chosen a group of immigrants whose presence in Russia is the least controversial, in order to not to fuel the already hostile feelings towards internal migrants from the Caucasus and newcomers from Central Asia, and to avoid potential tensions in international relations. Similarly, the criminal investigations launched against a group of police officers are little more than a PR gimmick; although the involvement of police officers in illegal schemes linked to migration is quite common in Russia, only several low-ranking individuals have ever been prosecuted, and their trials were widely reported by the pro-government media.

The election campaign dominated by anti-immigration measures

The government's sudden preoccupation with illegal immigration and the corruption associated with it has been linked to election campaigns ahead of the Moscow mayoral race and local elections in other Russian regions. By addressing the social problems faced by the majority of Russians, the current government is attempting to bolster its faltering legitimacy and is trying to solidify support among the electorate. The Kremlin's recent campaigns have tapped into the anti-immigration sentiments widely held both in Moscow and in other parts of the country, and are seen as a response to the diminishing public tolerance of corruption within the state administration, which has been widely considered to be the norm. The decision to adopt anti-immigration rhetoric in the run-up to the elections stems mainly from the fact that some sections of the extra-parliamentary opposition, particularly the Moscow mayoral candidate Alexei Navalny, have actively criticised the government for allowing illegal immigration to get out of control, and accused government officials of benefiting from migration-related cor-

ruption. Navalny, who openly uses nationalist rhetoric and has taken part in rallies organised by nationalists (including the so-called 'Russian Marches' and the 'Stop Feeding the Caucasus'

By addressing the social problems linked to migration which the majority of Russians face, the government is attempting to bolster its faltering legitimacy and solidify support among the electorate that is prone to nationalistic sentiments.

street protests), has gained popularity in Russia as a blogger committed to exposing the corruption of government officials and state companies. At the moment, the commitment to deal with Moscow's immigration problem is one of the key issues in his election manifesto, and serves as a pretext to discredit his pro-Kremlin rival Sergei Sobyenin. By adopting Navalny's potentially resonant rhetoric, and by using the powers and instruments at his disposal as acting mayor of Moscow, Sobyenin is attempting to demonstrate his effectiveness in fighting illegal immigration, and thus to expand his electoral base.

Anti-immigration sentiments in Russia

The negative attitudes towards immigrants in Russian society, which the government is currently trying to capitalise on, are leading to a rise in xenophobia. This is evidenced by a growing number of incidents in which isolated cases of ethnic violence have become flash points for wider conflicts regularly erupting across Russia. In recent months the biggest riots took place in the town of Pugachev⁹. In mid-

⁹ The unrest, which turned into clashes with the police, was caused by the killing of a Russian citizen by a migrant from Chechnya. The protesters, who demanded the deportation of the Caucasian diasporas and intervention by the government, managed to attract media attention by blocking one of the main roads in the region, <http://www.gazeta.ru/social/2013/07/08/5417369.shtml>

June the public opinion research centre VCIOM, which is close to the Kremlin, published the results of a survey showing that many Russians believe that foreign nationals seeking to settle in Russia pose the greatest threat to the country; this opinion was shared by a plurality of respondents (35%). As many as 74% of Russians believed that the large number of immigrants

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was bad for the country: 65% of respondents said that the presence of immigrants fuelled the rise of organised crime and corruption, while 56% saw the presence of immigrants as the cause of increased competition in the labour market. As a result, 58% of respondents suggested that the authorities should impose limits on the number of non-Russian-speaking foreigners allowed into the country, while priority ought to be given to Russian-speaking migrants and individuals of Russian ancestry¹⁰. Anti-immigration sentiments are particularly strong in Moscow, which is an attractive destination for migrants from other countries and other Russian regions.

The FSM estimates that there are currently more than 10 million immigrants in Russia¹¹. The country has traditionally been a popular migration destination for individuals from CIS member states, mainly from Uzbekistan

(2.5 million), Tajikistan (1.1 million), Kyrgyzstan (500,000) as well as from Ukraine (1.5 million) and Moldova (500,000)¹². Native Russians, however, are most discontent with the influx of immigrants from the South Caucasus and the Central Asian republics, as well as internal migrants from the Russian North Caucasus. In contrast to the 1990s, when Russia mainly received Soviet-born people from culturally-similar neighbouring countries, today the majority of immigrants are young, poorly educated, unfamiliar with the realities of life in Russia, and lacking Russian language skills¹³. The language barrier and cultural differences prevent them from integrating successfully. Hostile attitudes in urban areas have also been caused by the influx of economic migrants from the Russian North Caucasus (especially Chechnya and Dagestan). The problems arise when the newcomers come into contact with the local community. Native Russians tend to resent the defiant behaviour of the immigrants, their public celebration of religious rites, and their inability to speak the Russian language.

Another flash point is the large number of immigrants who settle in Russia illegally, which in turn creates fertile ground for corruption within the law enforcement agencies. Organised groups involved in people smuggling and in the employment of illegal migrants often bribe police officers in exchange for protection. One common phenomenon are the so-called 'rubber flats', which are used to provide a home address for several hundred or even several thousand migrants at any given time. Often the police are aware of the location of such apartments but choose not to take action. The indulgence of the authorities in such matters is a major cause of public criticism, and

¹⁰ <http://wciom.ru/index.php?id=459&uid=114322>, <http://www.levada.ru/30-08-2012/rossiyane-o-politike-v-otnoshenii-priezshikh>

¹¹ Statement by the Head of the Federal Migration Service, Konstantin Romodanovsky, http://www.gazeta.ru/comments/2013/03/01_a_4992997.shtml; according to the PEW Research Centre, Russia with over 12 million immigrants is currently the world's second most popular destination for migrants, <http://www.pewforum.org/2012/03/08/religious-migration-exec/>

¹² <http://www.newsru.com/russia/08apr2013/migranty.html>

¹³ According to the Russian Centre for Migration Research, 50% of migrant workers coming to Russia are unable to fill out documents in the Russian language, while 15-20% do not speak any Russian at all, <http://www.rg.ru/2013/05/14/migranti-site.html>

the reason for low levels of confidence in both the security structures and in the political authorities. Russians have increasingly been taking matters into their own hands in order to defend the interests of their ethnic group and to fight back against illegal immigration. Such grass-root initiatives usually include groups of self-appointed vigilantes tracking down illegal immigrants (for example, the so-called 'Cossack patrols', or groups of 'Orthodox Christian vigilantes'), or alternatively civil nationalist movements (such as Russia's Shield) which claim to cooperate with the FSM and the police. Sometimes, however, the individuals behind such initiatives become radicalised and begin operating on the fringes of the law; there have been several cases of activists using physical violence against immigrants or humiliating them in public¹⁴. Their readiness to cooperate with the police creates the impression among the general public that the authorities support such radical initiatives and sanction the use of violence against immigrants.

Migration as a recipe for Russia's problems

The adoption of fierce anti-immigration rhetoric by the Russian authorities as seen in recent times is drawing apart from the Kremlin's official migration policy doctrine which it has been trying to develop over the past several years¹⁵. Although inbound migration has been seen as a major source of tension in Russian society, it is a necessary condition for the country's economic development. This is because the influx of migrant labour can help Russia redress the labour deficit which the Russian economy will

inevitably face in the coming years. As a result of the current demographic trends and the expected developments in the Russian labour market, in the long term Russia cannot afford to deport large numbers of immigrants or to reduce the influx of immigrant labour.

Consequently, in recent years the Russian government has become increasingly pragmatic about immigration. The steps taken by the Kremlin have not aimed at closing the Russian borders, but rather at streamlining the relevant legislation and increasing control over who enters the country. In order to meet the economic and demographic forecasts, over the past few years the authorities have been gradually improving the laws governing the entry and settlement of immigrants in Russia. Since 2003 Russia has been using a system of quotas which specifies the number of work permits issued to foreigners; this includes CIS nationals, who had hitherto been able to enter and work in Russia virtually unrestricted (they had been able to travel to Russia without visas, on an internal passport equivalent to an ID card). In 2012, the government introduced a Russian-language

In recent years the Russian government has become increasingly pragmatic about immigration, because although the presence of immigrants is seen as the main source of tension in the society, it is essential for Russia's economic development.

exam for all foreigners wishing to work in Russia legally¹⁶, and increased the penalties for hiring illegal migrants. In 2013, the authorities toughened the rules on resident registration with a view to eliminating the so-called 'rubber apartments' and preventing the abuse of immigrants' rights. The authorities have also announced that from 2015 citizens of the Central Asian republics will need an international passport in order to enter Russia, which they hope

¹⁴ The footage of vigilante groups illegally entering the homes of immigrants can be found online: http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ucH4iWH7_KI#at=46

¹⁵ It proposes an immigration policy based on a correct diagnosis of the problems associated with immigration, and underlines the need to introduce systemic solutions aimed at increasing control over the influx of immigrants, improving their integration into society, and reducing corruption linked to people smuggling. <http://www.osw.waw.pl/en/publikacje/eastweek/2012-06-20/a-new-concept-migration-policy-russia>

¹⁶ <http://lenta.ru/news/2012/12/11/exam>

will increase the government's control over the influx of immigrants to the country. In parallel with these changes, the authorities have been introducing programmes aimed at helping immigrants integrate into Russian society, which is hoped to defuse ethnic tensions (some of these schemes are being implemented in cooperation with the Russian Orthodox Church).

The Kremlin's increasingly pragmatic attitude to immigration is linked to the fact that the government sees immigrants as a way of alleviating the negative effects of the decline in population observed since 1991, as well as for dealing with the growing labour shortage in the country. Currently, Russia has a population of 143 million people, but this figure has been rapidly declining, mostly due to low birth rates. Increasing the number of immigrants is therefore the most effective and readily available way to offset the shrinking population. In addition, the demographic trends of Russian cities could also be markedly improved by the influx of migrants from other Russian regions. For example, while the fertility rate in the Central Federal District stands at 1.37 children per woman, the lowest in Russia, in Chechnya the figure stands at 3.36¹⁷.

Greater openness to foreign workers is also seen as a way of meeting the needs of the Russian economy, which is poised to experience a labour shortage. Consequently, over time, the demand for migrant workers is bound to grow as the working population declines. This argument is further supported by the fact that contrary to popular belief immigrants do not compete for jobs with native workers. They tend to perform simpler and less well-paid jobs, requiring only basic skills, and typically confined to several sectors, such as the provision of municipal services, the construction industry, and small-scale trade. These types of work are generally rejected by native Russians.

¹⁷ Russia's average fertility rate is 1.58 children per woman, that is, below the replacement fertility level calculated at no less than 2.1 children per woman.

Consequences

The Russian economy needs immigrants, and taking the demographic and economic trends into account, this dependence will rise exponentially in the future. It therefore follows that adopting a restrictive immigration policy and stoking xenophobic sentiments among the Russian people by the use of anti-immigration rhetoric – particularly in relation to Russian citizens from the North Caucasus – is not in Russia's national interests. The recent anti-immigration campaigns mounted by the authorities should

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therefore be seen primarily as an attempt to strengthen the legitimacy of the government in the run-up to elections. However, playing the immigration card in this way may have very serious consequences.

First of all, the recent initiatives directed against illegal immigrants are likely to lead to a decline in tolerance of their presence among large parts of the indigenous population, and may in turn create a breeding ground for radicalised grassroots nationalists operating on the fringes of the law. Manipulating public opinion on an issue such as immigration can lead to a dangerous escalation of hostility towards migrants also from other regions of Russia – primarily from the North Caucasus, which is part of the Russian Federation. A rise in xenophobia, leading to open outbursts of hatred (as was the case in Pugachev), could therefore undermine the territorial integrity of the Russian state.

It should also be stressed that headline-grabbing anti-immigration campaigns, widely reported by the media, could significantly damage Russia's image abroad. Until now Russia has tried to present itself as a country open to immigrants, and has capitalised on the presence of diasporas by emphasising the close links between Russia and the former Soviet republics (such as Tajikistan and Uzbekistan). However, the recent decision to set up a makeshift tent camp for the detention of illegal immigrants has come under criticism from the international community. In the post-Soviet context, the term 'camp' is associated mainly with concentration camps, which were an integral part of the police state.

The direct consequences of the recent crackdown on immigrants in Moscow and in other Russian cities include legal, logistical and financial problems connecting with the deportation of this very large number of people, what may generate significant costs. It is therefore most likely that some of the immigrants will

not be sent back to their countries of origin¹⁸. The question remains, however, as to where they should stay and on what terms. Finally, the showcase trials of the police officers charged with corruption linked to migration may result in high levels of dissatisfaction among the Russian political and business elites who have been benefiting financially from this practice and have blocked the implementation of the relevant reforms. In fact, the recent initiatives launched by the Kremlin have breached the well-established informal rules that guaranteed impunity for those deriving an income from the grey zone linked to illegal migration. Similarly, selective prosecutions of those guilty of abuses of power will not improve the situation in this area. What is needed instead is consistent enforcement of the rules, which have hitherto largely existed only on paper, and an end to the occasional manipulation of public anti-immigration sentiments for political ends.

¹⁸ The official reason given by the authorities is the lack of documents among the detainees. Law enforcement officials have failed to determine the identity of 90% of the immigrants held at the Moscow tent camp, <http://www.rg.ru/2013/08/09/lichnost-site.html>

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