Myths and Realities

Migration in Russia: Socio-Political Implications

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Russia has never been a country of immigrants. Although since the rule of Catherine the Great it has seen periods when migrants were invited from abroad, their role as a demographic factor remained insignificant. In the Soviet era, Russia in its current borders was rather a country of emigration. Not to destinations beyond the USSR, of course. People from the constituent Russian Federative Republic moved to other Soviet republics.

The situation began to change in the mid-1970s, when migrants coming to the Russian Federation outnumbered those leaving it. Over a period of sixteen years (1975-1990), Russia's migration-driven population growth (about 2.7 million) equaled migration-related depopulation in the previous twenty years (1955-1974).

The indigenous residents of non-Russian Soviet republics accounted for part of the migration influx in those years. During a period between 1979 and 1989 (the years of censuses) the number of ethnic Moldovans in Russia grew by 69% (in Moldova, by mere 11%), of Georgians and Armenians, by 46% (in their respective republics, by 10% and 13%), of Azerbaijanis, by 120% (24%), of Uzbeks and Turkmenians, by 80% (34%), of Kyrgyzes by 190% (33%) and of Tajiks, by 110 % (46%), but in real terms that part of the influx was small. By and large it consisted of return migrants, i.e. Russians who had once left Russia, or their descendants.

Remigration surged up after the breakup of the Soviet Union. The migration wave of the 1990s brought in nearly five million new residents.

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Nationalities and ethnic groups of the Russian Federation accounted for 69% of them (Russians, for 59%). With Ukrainians and Belarusians included, the rate was far greater, 84%. The overall registered influx of other peoples, first and foremost, Armenians and Azerbaijanis, often completely Russianized, stood at about 700,000.

Higher migration-related population growth rates coincided with changes in its role in the country's demographic structure. Before the 1990s, Russia's population had been growing mostly due to natural surplus (a positive birth balance), although the contribution of migration was becoming more noticeable. In the second half of the 1980s, migration accounted for over one-fifth of the population growth. But in 1992 natural population growth gave way to natural depopulation, so migration turned into the sole and very important source of replenishing the population.

Although migration waves in the post-Soviet period, even those during the surge of the 1990s, were unable to fully compensate for natural depopulation, they considerably eased its effects. Russia's natural depopulation in 1993-2011, according to official statistics, totaled 13.2 million, while in reality the population shrank by 5.5 million. In other words, migration growth compensated for the depopulation by 58% (7.7 million).

Alongside the demographic demand for migration (and even slightly earlier than that) there developed the awareness of the economic demand for it, stemming from the situation on the market of labor. Back in the 1970s and 1980s, a great deal was said and written in the USSR about the need for drawing workforce into regions with labor shortages, such as Central Russia, Siberia and the Russian Far East, from other parts of the USSR, in particular, from over-populated Central Asia. For instance, the 26th Communist Party Congress in 1981 said that the workforce situation was "getting worse in a number of places. Programs for the development of West Siberia, the zone of the Baikal-Amur Railway and other sites in the Asian part of the country increased the influx of population there. And yet people still prefer to migrate from the North to the South and from the East to the West, although the rational placement of production forces requires just the opposite... In Central Asia and in a number of regions of the Caucasus there is an excess of

labor force, in particular, in rural areas. This means that the population of these areas should be involved in the development of new territories more actively."

Naturally, nothing was said then about the "cultural incompatibility" of Russians and Central Asians. Various plans were developed for attracting people from southern republics into Russia. Some of them were very far from realistic, for example the idea of relocating up to 3.4 million people – 40% of the annual population increase in Central Asia – to regions with insufficient labor resources in 1985-2000. In reality, the registered influx of migrants from Central Asian republics was very small at that time. In the last decade of the 20th century, the growth of Uzbek, Kyrgyz and Tajik communities in Russia was less than 50,000.

The migration boom of the mid-1990s was brief. It was over by the end of the decade and now the net migration into Russia is at a rather low level for a European country (see Table 1).

Table 1. Net migration into Russia and some European countries in 2008 and 2010, per 1,000 residents

Country	2008	2010	Country	2008	2010
Switzerland	12.7	8.3	The Netherlands	3.2	2.6*
Spain	10.0	1.3	Finland	2.9	2.6
Norway	9.4	8.9	Hungary	2.8	1.7*
Slovenia	9.1	-0.3	Britain	2.6	4.0
Italy	7.6	6.3	Slovakia	2.4	1.7
Sweden	6.0	5.3	Russia	1.8	1.1
Belgium	5.9	9.2	France	1.2	no data
Malta	5.9	5.4	Portugal	0.9	0.4
Cyprus	4.5	19.2	Ireland	0.8	-7.6
Denmark	3.4	1.9	Germany	-0.7	1.9

*2009. The countries are ranked by the 2008 parameter.
Source: *Eurostat.*

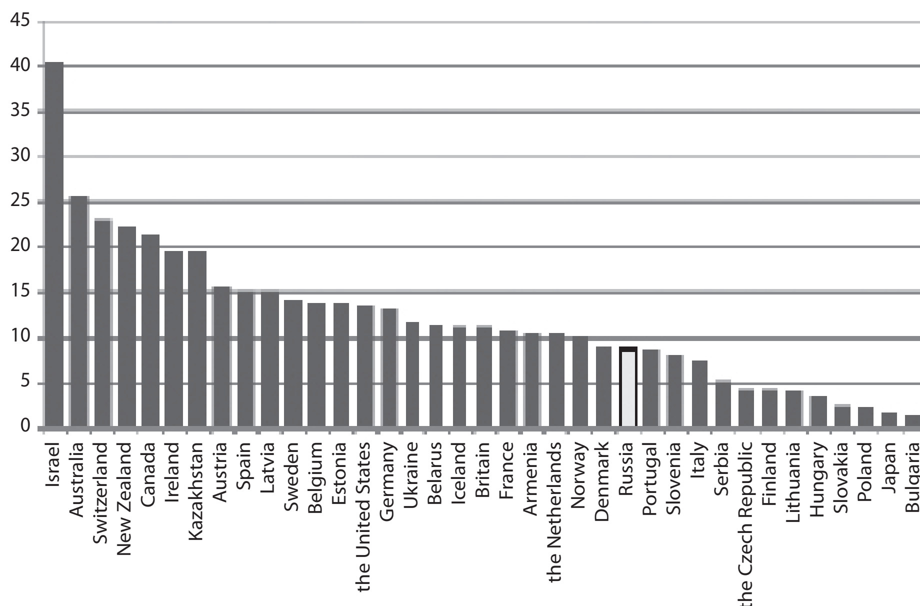
IS RUSSIA REALLY FLOODED BY MIGRATION WAVES?

Although the net migration into Russia is relatively small by the standards of many countries, there is a widely held view that the wave of migration is literally sweeping across the country. Politicians, journalists, and even some researchers point out that Russia is the second most important center of gravity for migration in the world. "Russia has become a major center for migrants in the Eastern Hemisphere, and it is second in size only to the U.S. migration flows." This media cliche reflects the general prejudice regarding the scale of migration flows.

Generally speaking, given that Russia is a country with the largest territory in the world and second only to the United States in terms of population among countries accommodating migrants (neither China, nor India, nor other demographic giants are countries receiving immigration flows), its second place by the number of immigrants is quite natural. However, is this so in reality?

According to UN statistics and World Bank estimates based on them, in 2010 the number of migrants to Russia amounted to more than 12 million, and this really puts the country second by this parameter behind the United States (actually, far behind, given 42.8 million migrants in the U.S.). Germany is third with 10.8 million. But these are absolute figures. They are not indicative of the real state of affairs. For example, in Russia in 2010 nearly 1.8 million babies were born – more than in any other European country. However, no one will say Russia has the highest birth rate in Europe. The same applies to migration. Indeed, a comparison between the migrant workers' total, considered by World Bank experts, and the population of respective countries shows that in Russia in 2010 migrants accounted for 8.7%, and this pushes it way down on the list of countries ranked by "migration pressures." Incidentally, the United States, too, finds itself in a very low position (Fig. 1). Even if one does not consider Israel, whose population took shape just recently and mainly through migration, a large number of European and non-European countries and even some former Soviet republics push Russia towards the bottom of the 37-country list shown in Fig. 1.

Fig 1. Total number of migrants, % of the population in respective countries



Source: *Migration and Remittances Factbook 2011. 2nd Edition. The World Bank.*

But that is not all. In fact, the estimates for Russia in general are not comparable with the estimates for most of the countries in Fig. 1. They show the cumulative number of migrants ("migrant stock"), i.e. the total number of people living outside of the country of their birth. According to the 2002 population census, Russia had 12 million natives of other countries. UN and World Bank experts consider them as international migrants. At the same time, they make a reservation – internal migrants in the former Soviet Union became international ones without traveling anywhere, just as a result of the emergence of new boundaries.

Understood in this way, the stock of migrants formed mainly during the Soviet era. According to UN estimates, in 1990 in Russia it was about 11.5 million, which corresponded to the Soviet population census of 1989. According to that census, ethnic Russians accounted for more than 50% of the migrant stock (together with Ukrainians and Belarusians, largely Russianized, they made up 89%). The top ten ethnic groups also included Armenians, Jews, Tatars, Chechens, Kazakhs, Ossetians and

Ingushes, with all the rest constituting mere 1.5%. According to the 2002 census, the number of people living in Russia, but born abroad, was 12 million – a reason enough for the UN to make new estimates. In contrast to 1990, the increase was insignificant. Those were mainly former citizens of the USSR born outside of the Russian Federative Republic, in one of the Soviet republics. This group includes, for example, children of the 1950s Virgin Lands Campaign participants born in Kazakhstan, children of military servicemen who served in various republics, Chechens, Ingushes and representatives of other repressed peoples, who were born after their parents' deportation to Kazakhstan and Central Asia, etc. At the same time, the "migrant stock" does not include people who were born in Russia but left its territory for a while (the very same military, specialists working on assignments away from home, etc.) and who have now returned only to be registered as migrants.

In short, the 12 million migrant workers mentioned in the UN and World Bank surveys, and the migrants who contributed to the migration-related population growth in Russia over the past two decades are very different groups, which overlap only partially and very insignificantly. Also, the real migration-fuelled population growth over the past 20 years, at least as far as registered migrants are concerned, is significantly smaller than the total cumulative number of migrants.

In addition to the registered migrants in Russia, there is a large number of undocumented ("illegal") ones, but nobody can tell how many. Estimates vary widely, sometimes rising to 15 million or even higher. The recently adopted *Concept of the State Migration Policy of the Russian Federation for a Period up to 2025* says that each year three to five million foreign nationals "are involved in labor activity in the country without official permission." This estimate is roughly similar to those made by researchers, yet it cannot be considered absolutely reliable. The actual number of undocumented migrants may be higher or lower.

THE ECONOMIC IMPERATIVE

Frequent complaints by officials, journalists and, occasionally, experts about confusing statistics merely show that delusions about migration are widely spread in Russia these days, and that they affect public opinion, migration policies, and even politics in the broad sense.

There is one indisputable and challenging fact, though: by virtue of profound demographic changes (not only in Russia, but also across the globe) the influx of migrants from abroad has become a source for replenishing populations in Russia and in most industrialized countries, and this role will last for a long time. The migration resource can be used to partially or fully compensate for natural depopulation (possibly, with a surplus, if a country is keen to see a population growth), or as a supplement to the natural population increase.

As has been said above, Russia since 1992 has experienced a natural population decline. In the second half of the 1990s and in the first half of the 2000s, the population was shrinking by 700,000 to 900,000 people annually. Since 2006, the decline has slowed down considerably to 129,000 and one has the impression it is about to disappear at all, giving way to natural growth, and the population can be stabilized without tapping the migration resource. Most probably this is a mistake. Lower natural depopulation rates after 2005 are primarily a result of favorable changes in the age structure, which reflect the deformations of the Russian sex-age pyramid in the past. However, the very same deformations will lead to the next wave of unfavorable structural changes, resulting in a reduction in the absolute number of births and an increase in the number of deaths, so the natural decline will grow again. In these conditions, the significance of the migration resource, needed at least to prevent a further decline of the population, will again increase.

In addition to these demographic considerations one finds economic motives, tightly pegged to the situation on the labor market. Generally speaking, the demographic and economic factors that determine demand for migration resources are not always the same. This is well seen in the so-called "demographic dividend" in Russia over the past two decades.

Starting from 1992, Russia experienced a natural population decline – a clear indication that demographic problems were serious indeed. But from the economic and social points of view the changes in the proportions of different age groups were favorable. In this sense the country received a "demographic dividend." In particular, the population decline for a long time was accompanied by an increase in the number (and the proportion) of people of working age: in 1993, it was below 84

million and in 2006 it exceeded 90 million. At the same time, the number of children under 16 years of age slumped from 35.8 million in 1992 to 22.7 million in 2006. The number of people of retirement age remained almost unchanged, at 29-30 million, and in 2006 it was even slightly lower than in 2002. As a result, the demographic burden on the working population was easing continuously. In 1993 it amounted to 771 people of "dependency" ages – before and after the working age – per 1,000 people of working age, whereas in 2006 it was only 580 per 1,000. It had never been so low before. Of course, this could not but have a favorable effect on social spending by the state – in as much as it depends on the demographic proportions it was minimal. One should remember that in those conditions the situation on the labor market was not ideal. Demand exceeded supply and was largely met owing to legal and illegal migration.

Starting from the second half of the last decade, the situation began to change for the worse. In 2007, the number of working age people declined for the first time over a long period. This downtrend is gaining pace. According to various scenarios the federal statistics service Rosstat has forecast, the working age population will shrink by 11.8 million over the next decade (2012-2022), which cannot but cause a shortage on the labor market and have adverse effects on economic growth.

A major reduction in the supply on the labor market in the next 10 to 15 years looks inevitable, and it will be accompanied by increased economic burden on every able-bodied employee. Now there are about 570 children and old people per one thousand people of working age. Under some estimates their number will increase by 159, under others, by 213, and under the most pessimistic scenario, by 242. This will result in a huge increase in social spending and exacerbate the economic situation. Demographic trends will cause a growth of demand for migrant labor, and eventually the labor market, that is, the economy in the broadest sense of the term will appear as the main "pro-migration agent." No politicians will be able to resist this reality. Demographic and economic considerations will require an ever greater influx of migrants, and this soaring demand, together with migration pressures from outside – from the poorer, overpopulated countries – will maintain a steady flow of immigrants from Russia's near neighbors and, perhaps, from more distant countries.

"BAD" MIGRANTS VS "GOOD" MIGRANTS

The large-scale influx of migrants from abroad is a major challenge, but it is also a chance not to be missed. Unfortunately, we are still far away from the full understanding of migration problems, let alone from resolving them. The public opinion in Russia (as well as in many other countries) tends to see only negative aspects of migration and the risks involved, but it clearly underestimates its positive potential, and most importantly, its objective inevitability, arising not only from Russia's demographic situation, but also from the global one. The media is brimming with migration-related stories utterly divorced from reality. This mythology falls into two types of stories – "the bad migrants myth" and "the good migrants myth."

The first one grossly overstates the number of migrants in Russia, as was mentioned above, and accuses them of collective evils – crime, drug dealing, spreading infectious diseases, etc., but presents little proof. Its invariable emphasis on some link between migration and growing crime rates is a characteristic example, although, according to regularly published official Interior Ministry statistics, foreign migrants' share in all crimes committed in the country is just 1.5-2%. Moreover, as Federal Migration Service officials say, the bulk of the migrant crimes involve using forged documents. Another argument against migrants (quite common in other countries, too) is competition with locals for jobs. However, both domestic and foreign experience shows that local people and immigrants usually occupy different, almost non-overlapping, niches on the labor market, and most immigrants agree to do jobs the local people refuse.

The other myth contrasts "bad immigrants," whose influx should be limited by all means, and "good immigrants," worth attracting in every possible way. They repeatedly claim Russia needs skilled immigrants. Remarkably, the term "skilled" is never defined, and it remains unclear whether it applies to skilled factory or farm workers, top managers or high-class researchers and Nobel laureates – as if there were no demand for machine tool operators, unskilled or low-skilled labor. This group disregards the fact that there is always a very high proportion of low-skilled labor in all large immigration flows that Russia may experience today and in the near future. These are former peasant farmers, unpre-

pared or poorly prepared for the urban environment. Their cheap labor is always in demand. Such migrants formed a good part of the urban population of Russia and other countries. These people become educated and skilled after spending a long time in urban conditions. The current global migration in a sense reproduces the situation of the 19th-20th centuries, although at a different level: the global village is migrating into the global city. Can one stay away from this world trend?

The group of people conventionally referred to as "compatriots" is another type of "good migrants." In 2006, Russia adopted a state program to assist voluntary resettlement of Russians living abroad. The delusion is any compatriot is always good and necessary. However, the very term "compatriot" is interpreted very broadly, which makes it difficult to distinguish between "good" migrants and "bad" ones. Under the current law *On the State Policy of the Russian Federation in Respect of Compatriots Abroad,* the "compatriots abroad" include "people who were citizens of the USSR, who reside in states that were part of the Soviet Union, who acquired the citizenship of those states or became stateless persons." But this interpretation of "compatriots" lets the public at large see many of the "compatriots" as "bad" migrants – low-skilled, malicious, sick, bearing "alien cultures," etc. Apparently, there should be additional filters (possibly some are already in place) separating "good" compatriots from "bad" ones. Maybe this is the reason why the program was not a great success. It was hoped that in 2007-2009 Russia would accommodate 200,000 immigrants, while in reality it welcomed a little over 16,000, and by the beginning of 2012 the total number of compatriots who had resettled to Russia reached 62,500 – not very many, if one recalls that the total net migration over the same years was at least a million people.

In common parlance, the term "compatriot" is often used as a synonym of "ethnic Russian" or, broadly, "bearer of Russian culture." In principle, there would be nothing wrong about it, if Russia really created preferences for returning people of Russian culture and, for that matter, of the cultures of the country's other ethnic groups. However, this issue should be considered separately from migration issues that have demographic and economic roots – for purely quantitative considerations.

Indeed, the 1990s saw a massive return of people of Russian descent or their descendants, but, unfortunately, there was no government program to assist their relocation at that time. Now the mobile resources of such remigration are largely exhausted. There are still many Russians living outside of Russia, but they do not necessarily fall under the category of "compatriots living abroad." For example, most foreign Russians live in Ukraine, but they are not immigrants who had moved there from Russia. They have always lived there, and it would be strange to expect that they might generate a large return migration flow. As for genuine "natives of Russia" living abroad, immigrants or their descendants, and even those who may be willing to go back to Russia, a significant part of them just cannot do so because of old age, failing health, family bonds, etc. So the real migration potential of "compatriots abroad" is small. In any case, it is not comparable to Russia's demand for migrants.

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The history of human thought indicates that mythology is an inevitable, but transient stage on the way to understanding the true nature of things. It is to be hoped that Russians' views on the challenges of contemporary migrations will not remain at the stage of mythology.

Issues related to migration will be inevitable and increasingly important items on the 21st-century agenda in Russia. One must be prepared for this. Rejection of anti-migrant mythology should not lead to an underestimation of the risks associated with migration, but help develop a sober constructive policy that would minimize migration risks and maximize its benefits.