The Moscow Times
30 YEARS
INDEPENDENT NEWS FROM RUSSIA

Moscow Wants Emigrees Home, At Lower Cost

By Paul Goble

September 29, 2010



Staunton ⊠ Moscow spent less than a quarter of the amount that it had budgeted to attract compatriots living overseas to come back to Russia, a cutback that may be a simple reflection of Russia's economic problems but nevertheless reduces the chance that Moscow will convince many Russians to return.

The exact difference: Russia spent about 1.8 billion rubles ($59 million) instead of 8 billion rubles ($260 million).

That has two major consequences. It means that an increasing share of migrant workers to the Russian Federation in 2010 and in future years will consist of those who aren't ethnic or cultural Russians, a trend certain to exacerbate interethnic and interreligious tensions in Russia.

About The Columnist

Paul Goble is a longtime specialist on ethnic and religious issues in Eurasia. Most recently, he was director of research and publications at the Azerbaijan Diplomatic Academy. Earlier he served as vice dean for the social sciences and humanities at Audentes University in Tallinn and was a senior research associate at the EuroCollege of the University of Tartu in Estonia.

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And the cutback means that Moscow will likely be playing a smaller role in ethnic Russian communities in the Baltic states and other former Soviet republics, despite the claims of ethnic Russian activists in those countries and the desire of some Russian nationalists to use ethnic Russian communities to promote closer ties between the ethnic Russians and the Motherland.

In reporting this development, Alexandr Raskin, the deputy chief editor of "Expert Online," argued that the funding cutbacks put the entire program at risk, even though officials such as Federal Migration Service chief Konstantin Poltoranin has insisted that it "does not mean the liquidation of the program."

According to FMS officials, Raskin said, their institution asked for the reductions because its analysts concluded that no more than 20,000 people would move to Russia, far fewer than many Moscow officials and politicians had been projecting just a couple of years ago.

When the program was designed for the period 2007-2012, officials projected that 132,400 people would return ⊠ others suggested that as many as 300,000 would do so, Raskin noted ⊠ but in fact only 8,800 have done so thus far.

Over the last several years, Russian officials have sought to promote migration of compatriots to economically weak regions in Russia, rather than to Moscow or other major cities, by offering more money to those prepared to move to the former and much less to those who want to go to the latter.

While FMS officials continue to be upbeat, many other parts of the bureaucracy are not. Igor Lyakin-Frolov, the deputy director of the Foreign Ministry's information department, for example, told Raskin that "the program is really ineffective." He added that various ministries, including his own, are discussing how to transform it.

FMS officials have acknowledged there are problems, including their own inability to guarantee appropriate housing for those who return. That guarantee depends on the regions, and some of them haven't been helpful to returned Russians: Moscow's role is limited when it comes to ensuring that returnees obtain Russian citizenship quickly.

Independent analysts are skeptical of the program, with some arguing that Moscow hasn't supported it adequately and others saying it is poorly designed, Raskin also said. Dmitry Oreshkin, a political analyst, has said Moscow should have addressed this issue 15 or more years ago when many more ethnic Russians were interested in moving to Russia.

During the early 1990s, Russia absorbed up to 1 million compatriots per year because "people were fleeing from real threats" in Central Asia and the Caucasus. Meanwhile, Russia treated those people poorly in regards to housing and employment.

The situation changed in the mid-1990s. Local and regional officials were less interested in taking in professionals for whom there were no jobs. What's more, many in Moscow "began to think that a return to the U.S.S.R. was possible" and that the continued presence of ethnic Russians in the former republics would help that cause.

A former deputy director of the Russian bureau of the International Migration Organization, Guram Sanikidze, is more skeptical than most Russian analysts. He suggested that people aren't going to move to Russia ⊠ "they do not have money for that" ⊠ and that as a result, "the program is condemned to failure."

The amount of money offered by Russia's government isn't enough to meet the nearly 1 million rubles ($33,000) that a family needs for the move, Sanikidze said. The amount Moscow is offering is "a drop in the bucket" and won't convince anyone except the most desperate.

Instead, he concluded, "this is a propaganda program, used by the administration of Vladimir Putin as one of the aspects of the pre-election presidential race which is beginning now in Russia." It may make for good public relations, but it is not something with a high likelihood of giving Moscow the results that it says it wants.

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