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INDEPENDENT NEWS FROM RUSSIA

Migrants Turn Moscow Into Europe's Biggest City

By Herbert Mosmuller

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A migrant worker taking a break from cleaning Tverskaya Ulitsa. Migrating pays off, with the average wage in Moscow almost double the national figure. **Igor Tabakov**

Moscow is Europe's biggest city with a population that has swelled by 1.1 million people over the past eight years, mostly due to an inflow of migrants attracted by the best wages in the country, new statistics show.

The population has grown from 10.4 million to 11.5 million since 2002, as provincial Russians and natives from other former Soviet republics flock to the country's sprawling, chaotic capital, according to preliminary data from last fall's national census.

Moscow now boasts more than twice as many inhabitants as St. Petersburg, the country's second-largest city with 4.7 million, and almost eight times more than Novosibirsk, which ranks third with 1.4 million, according to statistics released last week on the web site for the census.

Moscow is also Europe's biggest city, well ahead of London, which places No. 2 with 7.7 million residents as of 2010, according to statistics by the British capital's authorities.

The population growth in Moscow was the biggest among all 83 regions of the country in both relative and absolute figures, said Irina Sherbakova, who heads the demography department at Moscow's statistics service.

The growth is not due to birthrates, which have remained lower than death rates for years — although births finally outnumbered deaths by a modest 4,000 last year.

"This is something that has not occurred since the 1990s," Sherbakova said.

The lion's share of the population increase is credited to migrants. In 2010 alone, 126,000 newcomers were officially registered in the city.

The actual number of people living in Moscow may stand at 13 million to 17 million if unregistered migrants are taken into account, experts said.

Respondents were not asked about their legal status during the census, but many illegal immigrants likely refused to participate anyway, Gavkhar Dzhurayeva, head of the Migration and Law Center, said Tuesday by telephone.

Two female migrants from Uzbekistan and Kyrgyzstan told The Moscow Times on Tuesday that they had not heard of the census and were never polled by census takers last October. Both are legal migrants working as cleaners in one of the city's office buildings.

There are no hard data on illegal immigrants in Moscow, but they are estimated to number several million. Natalya Zubarevich, a social policy expert with Moscow State University, put their number at 2 million to 3 million, while Dzhurayeva said they might be as many as 5 million.

On top of that, about 1.5 million commuters pour into the city daily from the Moscow region, with an unknown but probably high percentage staying in the city for at least a couple days a week, Zubarevich said.

Migrating and commuting pay off, even though traffic is a nightmare and affordable housing is in short supply. According to the State Statistics Service, the average monthly salary in Moscow stood at 38,200 rubles ($1,350) last year, almost double the nationwide figure of 20,300 rubles.

Moscow will continue to attract migrants as long as living standards here remain far higher than in the rest of the country, said Oleg Pachenkov, deputy head of the Center for Independent Scientific Research.

Most state bodies, including the government, the State Duma and the Supreme Court, are situated in Moscow, as are headquarters of leading businesses, which seek proximity to the authorities.

"Everything happens in Moscow, first and foremost in economic life," Pachenkov said in e-mailed comments. "We need to change the situation in other regions to move the flow

of migrants away from the capital."

He said authorities also needed to improve Moscow infrastructure to prevent current suburbs from becoming slums and ghettos devoid of social life.

"We must prevent neighborhoods from existing only for sleep or consumption, ensuring that they produce something — services, culture, social services — to make a living," Pachenkov said.

Moscow is also noted for its gender and marital discrepancies, some of which are credited to migrants as well.

There were more married men than women in Moscow in 2010, something that was the other way around eight years ago, according to census data, which provided no exact figures for married residents.

The odd situation may be due to the fact that many male migrants are married, but their wives and families reside in their home countries, said Sherbakova of the city's statistics service.

But she added that the migration of single female workers has increased recently.

On the whole, female Muscovites outnumbered the males by 800,000 last year, up from 470,000 in 2002. This means that men only make up 46.3 percent of Moscow's population.

But this is a general trend for Russia, and the ratio is even worse in many other regions — for example, Smolensk, where women make up 55 percent of the population, said Zubarevich, of Moscow State University.

Neither does the abundance of women make Moscow the capital of romance, because most of the surplus is made up of the elderly, she said.

Male life expectancy in Russia is drastically lower than female — 62.9 years compared with 75 years. The figures are usually ascribed to rampant alcoholism, low-quality health care and poor safety standards.

Moscow actually fares better on this than the rest of the country, with male Muscovites living on average for 68.5 years versus 77.2 years for females.

Zubarevich credited this discrepancy to the fact that Moscow men are better educated and have access to better health care.

Living standards do not necessarily leave time for personal life, though. Census data show that the capital boasts 2 million singles — which are, interestingly, evenly split between the two sexes.

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