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Nationalism Debate Has Become More Civilized

By Olga Troitskaya

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On Jan. 23, Prime Minister Vladimir Putin published an article in Nezavisimaya Gazeta on Russia's nationalities and migration policy. Experts regard this as a tactical move aimed at capturing supporters of the Communist and Liberal Democratic parties that both play to the nationalist tune. The broader question, however, is why immigration has become a prominent issue in the country's presidential campaign.

Over the past decade, Russia experienced an inflow of labor migrants that amounts to about 10 percent of its overall manpower. It is only natural that while about 80 percent of Russians seek college degrees, low-skilled niches in the labor market are being filled by immigrants.

Within Russian society, attitudes toward immigration have so far been mixed. Realizing the benefits of cheap migrant labor and using it extensively for business and private needs, Russians are nevertheless reluctant to take immigration for granted. The slogan "Russia for Ethnic Russians!" is becoming increasingly popular: 58 percent supported this idea in 2011

compared with 43 percent in 1998. The share of those who think that immigration should be restricted grew from 45 percent in 2002 to 64 percent in 2011, and in Moscow the number grew to 78 percent.

Several factors explain the current controversy over immigration.

First and foremost, the economic costs of migration are broadly perceived to outweigh its benefits. The structure of migration flows is heavily tilted toward low-skilled workers. Immigration of highly qualified labor into Russia is insignificant. It accounts for 20,000 to 40,000 specialists per year, which is nothing compared with the millions of low-skilled migrants flooding in from the post-Soviet republics in Central Asia, China, Turkey and Vietnam.

Another problem is the predominantly informal character of migrant economic activity. According to reliable estimates, there are between 3 million and 5 million illegal migrants in Russia — twice as many as the number of legally registered labor migrants. Law compliance is weak even among the latter group. More than 60 percent of legal migrants admitted in a recent survey that they had bribed officials or submitted fake contracts to the Federal Migration Service to get their documents. As a result of tax evasion, the federal budget loses about $10 billion a year, not to mention indirect costs from the lack of control over labor and technological standards.

Surveys of the migrant population show that migrants usually earn less and work harder than Russian citizens. An average hourly wage of a migrant worker is 40 percent to 50 percent below that of local workers, while a migrant's working week is 50 percent longer — 60 hours instead of the 40 hours prescribed by the Russian Labor Code. This has convinced many that demand for migrant labor is driven primarily by wage-dumping and not by real deficits on the labor market. Moreover, there is no evidence that low-cost labor makes products cheaper in Russia. The informal market in migration has given birth to a whole class of dealers — private subcontractors and recruiting agencies who act as intermediaries between employers and authorities and may also be selling the final product. A dealer's profit can reach up to 150 percent of real labor costs, thus inflating rather than reducing prices.

Second, migrants have served as a lightning rod for political mobilization. They are routinely assigned the blame for unresolved social and economic problems, including unemployment, corruption and crime. At times, this not only turned people's attention away from public policy failures, but also helped to boost self-esteem among the Russians by shifting responsibility onto scapegoats.

A third source of tensions stems from the unresolved internal conflict in the North Caucasus. The topic of Chechnya has featured prominently in political debates, especially during the current election season because it is viewed as a promising way of rallying public support. The most common themes for speculation are the massive transfers from the federal budget to Russia's southern republics. Today, 62 percent of Russians support the slogan "Stop Feeding the Caucasus!" Such rhetoric stirs up the negative sentiment toward all migrants from the Caucasus region, whether they come from Russia's own republics or from Azerbaijan, Georgia and Armenia.

Finally, Russians increasingly perceive migrants from the former Soviet republics as

culturally different. The share of immigrants who grew up after the demise of the Soviet Union and do not know the Russian language is rising. Over half of the immigrants confess that their command of Russian is insufficient to fill in the basic documents. Other fault lines are based on the Islamic-Orthodox difference between migrants and Russians and the rural-urban contradictions that have become manifest in almost any interaction between the two groups in large and medium-sized cities.

Popular discontent with immigration used to take the form of violence against migrants from ultranationalist groups or sporadic clashes between indigenous "locals" and "newcomers." Today, however, the conflict has taken new, more civilized forms: from parliamentary discussions and television debates to organized and relatively peaceful public actions. In other words, nationalism may soon morph from Putin's favorite bugaboo into a powerful mobilizing force of anti-government protests.

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The views expressed in opinion pieces do not necessarily reflect the position of The Moscow Times.

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