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Russia Puts Renewed Hope in Repatriation Program

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President Putin's efforts to encourage Russians to return home are seen as part of a drive to boost flagging birth rates.

President Vladimir Putin has revised the state's repatriation program, simplifying the process for former compatriots to move back to Russia and bring relatives along with them. But analysts doubt that the changes will significantly alter migration flows.

Earlier this year, the president said that if the demographic decline is not reversed, Russia's population would shrink from the current 143 million to 107 million by 2050.

The simplified repatriation program, to take effect in perpetuity as of Dec. 31, will even cover relocation costs, Alexander Zhuravsky, head of the Regional Development Ministry's interethnic relations department, told Rossiiskaya Gazeta in an interview published Monday.

The program, whose revision Putin signed Friday, also gives returning expatriates more

leeway in choosing a region of residence and lowers their income tax rate from 30 percent to the 13 percent that regular Russian residents pay, Zhuravsky said.

Regaining Russian citizenship will take a few months, Zhuravsky said, and participating families can now bring along grandmothers, grandfathers, brothers, sisters and even adopted children. He emphasized that the program was not just for ethnic Russians.

However, analysts told The Moscow Times that changes in the program were useful but insufficient and would not allow the government to significantly boost immigration.

Konstantin Zatulin, director of the Commonwealth of Independent States Institute think tank and former chief of the State Duma's CIS Committee, said the new program offers "fractional improvements" but is "not revolutionary" and "doesn't remove all the problems."

The Main Problem

The main problem is that Russian citizenship can be obtained only after the repatriate gets permanent registration, after he or she buys a residence, which can be expensive, or moves to a temporary migration center, which not every region has, Zatulin said.

Vladimir Mukomel, head of xenophobia and extremism prevention studies at the Russian Academy of Sciences' Sociology Institute, said that although the changes in the program are "useful" and "capable of solving many problems," he "doubts whether they are capable of drastically altering" migration flows.

The federal government reimburses regions for only a portion of the expenses incurred for receiving repatriates, and regional budgets are often too meager to support the program, Mukomel said.

Federal funding of the program has fallen from several billion rubles annually in 2008 and 2009 to a total of 1.2 billion rubles ($40 million) in 2010 and 2011, then only 200 million rubles ($6.5 million) planned for this year, Mukomel said.

Prime Minister Dmitry Medvedev stated this year's allocated funding at a meeting on Sept. 6, according to a transcription on the government's website.

This year's funding will go to "creating conditions in the regions" for returning compatriots, including relocation-related transportation expenses and a one-time allowance — "the startup capital," Medvedev said.

"It is evident that many compatriots would like to return to their homeland, but in making such decisions, they naturally think how they would be welcomed here," Medvedev said. "They must be sure that they will be provided a job here and that their children will go to a kindergarten or school."

"We are keen on making migration flows meet the needs of the economic development of our country and our regions," Medvedev added.

Migration Sentiment

On Oct. 15, the Foreign Ministry will hold a 6 million ruble tender for a study on migration sentiment among compatriots abroad in order to predict how many would relocate to Russia, RIA-Novosti reported, citing the website for state purchases.

The survey will question Russians living in Germany, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Latvia, Moldavia, Tajikistan, Uzbekistan and Ukraine.

According to a February article in Komsomolskaya Pravda, Putin set a task for the government to boost immigration by about 300,000 people annually through attracting "compatriots living abroad" and "qualified foreign expats."

According to Zhuravsky's Rossiiskaya Gazeta interview, 32,000 former compatriots moved back to Russia under the program last year. So far this year, 22,000 more have returned, and 50,000 more are expected by year-end, he said.

About 80,000 people have been repatriated under the program since its inception in 2006, RIA-Novosti reported Friday, citing the Federal Migration Service. More than 60 percent were under 40 years old.

More than half were ethnic Russians, while about 16 percent were Ukrainian or Armenian, 4.6 percent Tajik and 2.5 percent Tatar, Zhuravsky said. The program has also reached out to Tatars and Karelians in Finland, Germans in Kazakhstan and Germany, and Setos in Estonia.

But Mukomel of the Russian Academy of Sciences pointed out that the program failed to meet its 450,000-person expectation. Most of the repatriates relocated to central Russia instead of faraway regions that most needed the labor force, and many repatriates were children, single mothers or retirees who did not get jobs.

Repatriates were allowed to come to only certain regions, and only if they agreed to certain jobs that were often so poorly paid that even illegal CIS migrants would not take them, Mukomel said.

The revised program focuses on repatriates who would start their own business or relocate their business from abroad. Repatriates can also come to Russia to study or do business, instead of being hired by a certain employer as the program previously required, said Zatulin of the CIS Institute.

Almost all 83 Russian regions will now take part in the program, but repatriates who settle in priority areas, such as far eastern border territories, would get a "considerably" larger allowance from the state, Zhuravsky said.

Repatriation programs in Germany and Israel are based on ethnicity, but in Russia this is not possible because, being the successor of the Soviet Union, it is a multiethnic country, he said.

But, Zhuravsky added, program participants must feel cultural, historical and spiritual relation to Russia.

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