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Central Asian Migrants Change Face of Moscow

By The Moscow Times

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Timur Bulgakov has a black belt in karate, two university degrees, a powerful SUV and a small yet thriving construction company. The 28-year-old's success is impressive for a Muslim migrant from Uzbekistan whose first job in Moscow 10 years ago was as a delivery boy.

But his story is no longer that unusual.

The old Moscow, populated largely by Slavs, is rapidly giving way to a multiethnic city where Muslims from Central Asia are the fastest-growing sector of the population. And they are changing the face of Moscow as their numbers rise and they move up the career ladder, taking on more visible roles in society.

Muslim women wearing hijabs are a growing sight on the capital's shopping streets. Bearded men sport Muslim skullcaps and hang trinkets with Koranic verses in their cars. Many more are nonpracticing Muslims who blend in with secular attire, although their darker skin,

accented speech and foreign customs often provoke frowns from native Muscovites. Meanwhile, their children — some born and raised in the capital — throng kindergartens and schools.

The Federal Migration Service estimates that about 9.1 million foreigners arrived in Russia to work in 2011. More than a third came from three impoverished Central Asian countries that were once part of the Soviet Union: About 2 million from Uzbekistan, 1 million from Tajikistan and more than 500,000 from Kyrgyzstan.

Local experts say the number of Central Asian arrivals is at least twice as high. And hundreds of thousands of Central Asians have already acquired Russian passports and are off the migration services' radar.

The Central Asian migration has been the driving force in boosting Russia's Muslim population to more than 20 million, from some 14 million 10 years ago, a phenomenon experts call one of the most radical demographic makeovers Russia has ever seen.

"Today, we're standing on the verge of a powerful demographic explosion, a great migration period equal to the one that took place in the first centuries A.D.," said Vyacheslav Mikhailov, a former minister for ethnic issues and a presidential adviser on ethnic policies.

Muslims are expected to account for 19 percent of Russia's population by 2030, up from 14 percent of the current population of 142 million, according to the U.S. government's National Intelligence Council report on global trends published this month.

"Russia's greatest demographic challenge could well be integrating its rapidly growing ethnic Muslim population in the face of a shrinking ethnic Russian population," the report said. The changing ethnic mix "already appears to be a source of growing social tensions."

By the most conservative estimates, 2 million Muslims now live in Moscow, a city of nearly 12 million.

Polls show that nearly half of Russians dislike migrants from Central Asia and the North Caucasus, another source of Muslim migration. They have become the bogeymen of Russian nationalists, accused of stealing jobs, forming ethnic gangs and disrespecting Russian customs.

"If you build a mosque in downtown Moscow, slaughter sheep on your holiday and impose your traditions on us, no one will want you as a neighbor," said Dmitry Dyomushkin, a veteran Russian neo-Nazi skinhead who heads a nationalist party.

For years, Central Asian migrant workers have filled the lowest-paying jobs, working as janitors, street cleaners, construction workers, vendors at outdoor markets and unlicensed cab drivers, whose run-down cars are popularly known as "jihad taxis."

Many live in trailers at construction sites, in squalid basements and in overcrowded flophouses, or they sleep in their cars. The uncertain legal status of many of the migrant workers has left them vulnerable to abuse and exploitation from employers. They also have fallen victim to xenophobic attacks.

But they are increasingly becoming more established members of the workforce. And a significant minority, like Bulgakov, now run their own successful businesses.

The undisputed star among Russia's Central Asian business figures is the ethnic Uzbek Alisher Usmanov. His interests in mining, telecom and Internet startups have made him one of Russia's richest men, with a fortune estimated at $18.1 billion, and he is the co-owner of British soccer club Arsenal.

Filmmaker Timur Bekmambetov, who was born in Kazakhstan and educated in Uzbekistan, has directed some of Russia's top-grossing movies. Recently, he moved to Hollywood, directing this year's "Abraham Lincoln: Vampire Hunter" and before that "Wanted," a 2008 action flick with Angelina Jolie.

Uzbek native Mirzakarim Norbekov has penned half a dozen best-sellers based on the medical teachings of the Muslim medieval scholar Avicenna, who was born in what is now Uzbekistan. His medical training center in Moscow charges hundreds of dollars for short healing courses.

And while the Central Asian influx has caused frictions, there are also abundant signs of non-Muslim Muscovites embracing things seen as quintessentially Central Asian.

Uzbek restaurants, fast-food joints and clay-oven bakeries that churn out cakes and meat pies have become ubiquitous. Fashionistas sport Oriental silk scarves and *pashminas* that resemble hijabs. And many ethnic Russian housewives buy halal meat, believing it to be healthy and devoid of chemical preservatives.

The trend may have deep roots in Russian history. Unlike most European capitals, Moscow has absorbed Muslims into its population for centuries.

The principality of Moscow emerged as a regional power some 700 years ago, when the Golden Horde, a state dominated by Mongols and Muslim Tatars, controlled parts of what is now southern Russia, the Caucasus and Central Asia.

As Moscow took over the Horde's territories and invaded lands that once had been conquered by Arabs, Persians and Turks, Muslim nobles became part of the Russian elite, and Muslims were free to practice their faith under the tsars.

Novelist Vladimir Nabokov proudly wrote that his aristocratic family descended from Nabak, an illegitimate son of Genghis Khan. Composer Sergei Rachmaninoff and writer Mikhail Bulgakov were the offspring of Tatar nobles.

"Muslims are not newcomers here, and all the current problems are temporary," said Vladilen Bokov, a devout Muslim and member of the Public Chamber, which advises the Kremlin on social issues.

Central Asians are far from being a homogeneous group. Kyrgyz are proud of their militant nomadic heritage, while Uzbeks and Tajiks extol their cultures, which produced poets and scholars who contributed to medieval Muslim civilization.

Tsarist armies finished the conquest of Central Asia by the early 20th century, and Stalinist purges decimated their elites. The Soviet era reshaped their economies and agriculture

and made "Russification" a key to success for several generations of their best and brightest.

In the 1980s, Central Asian conscripts became a majority in the Soviet Army as birth rates among ethnic Russians plummeted.

Communist Moscow tried to win the sympathies of Central Asians — and uproot their Muslim traditions — by building schools and universities. Their graduates are still qualified to work as bank clerks, computer engineers, artists and medical doctors in Russia. Employers often praise them for their hard work, career ambitions and indifference to alcohol, Russia's proverbial scourge.

The 1991 Soviet collapse was followed in their overpopulated republics by ineffective economic reforms, political unrest, a resurgence of Islamic traditions and a gradual loss of Soviet mentality.

But the number of Russian speakers remains high. They visit Russia visa-free and can stay here for up to three months, or longer if they get work or residence permits.

Bulgakov has faced his share of hardships. Square-jawed and burly, he recalled over a cup of steaming tea how he stole some undercooked buckwheat from a dormitory kitchen several days after losing a job.

He lost another job after beating up his supervisor for calling him a "churka," a pejorative term for Central Asians. Bulgakov said that during a hospital visit he heard a doctor reproaching his ethnic Russian wife for failing to "find a decent Russian man."

After several years of selling construction paint, Bulgakov started his own company. Now, his company renovates apartments of affluent Muscovites and works on occasional contracts with the Defense Ministry.

He also joined the pro-Kremlin United Russia party and wants to run for office in the Moscow suburb of Ivanteyevka, where he lives with his wife and two children.

Bulgakov, who sports a ring made of white gold with a sparkling diamond, has advice for fellow Central Asians seeking a better life in Moscow.

"If you want to work, just work," he said, "If you don't, you'll find a thousand excuses: 'I am being oppressed, abused, beaten.'"

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