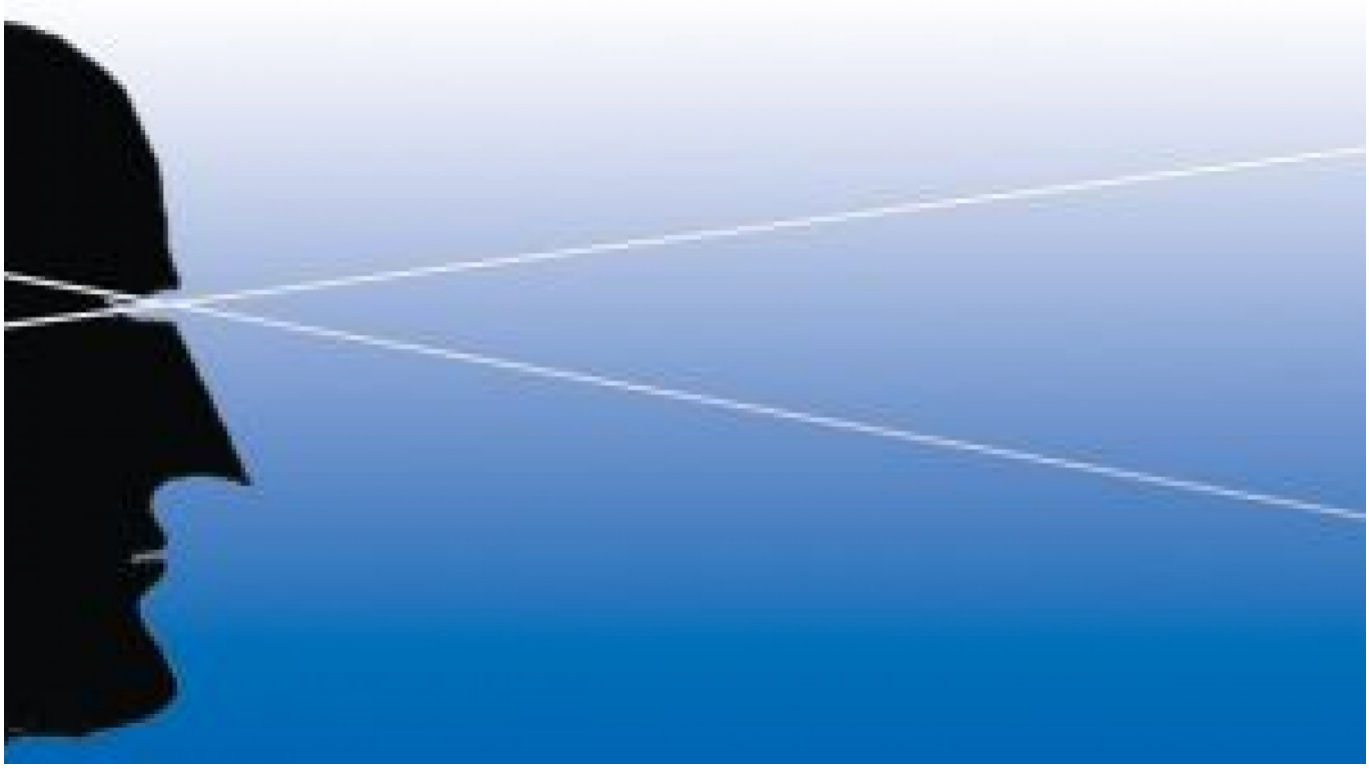
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The Propiska Sends Russia Back to the U.S.S.R.

By Georgy Bovt

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The Russian word propiska is difficult to translate into any foreign language because the practice of requiring residence permits of its own citizens is a strictly Russian invention. The need for these permits is one of Russia's most enduring phenomena, a legacy inherited initially from Peter the Great, who required that citizens carry passports and be registered at their place of residence. The system was later adopted by Josef Stalin, who instituted a system of tight controls over the movements of Soviet citizens in 1932. At the same time, residents of Russia's many villages and rural settlements were not issued full-fledged passports until 1974. After the Soviet collapse, the constitutional right to move around and relocate freely within the country became a symbol of post-Soviet Russia, much like the newly given right to travel abroad. Moscow introduced its own "special registration requirements" but had to drop them after the Constitutional Court ruled them unconstitutional.

Do Russian citizens really have the freedom now to move and live wherever they choose? No conclusive answer can be given to that question. To get a residence permit in the first place,

the applicant must present proof of ownership, a rental contract or a letter of permission from the owner. In other words, it is not enough to simply inform the Russian government that you can be contacted at a particular address if the need arises. Furthermore, Russians who lack residence registration can be denied employment, permission to open a bank account, the right to obtain a driver's license and the right for their children to attend school.

In other words, the residence permit often becomes the basis for discrimination and bribes. Although Russia has a unified system of compulsory health insurance, individuals who are not registered in the region where they fall ill might even be denied emergency medical assistance. Local clinics often refuse to accept patients who are not registered in that district, even though Russian law mandates that they should.

Russians willing to pay extra fees can easily circumvent these hurdles and exercise their right to live wherever they choose. Counterfeit papers are easily obtained through any one of the many illicit firms that plaster their ads on nearly every metro car in Moscow. The practice reaches such an absurd level that the holders of fake registration papers often have no idea where the official place of residence that appears on the permit is located.

Now, the authorities have decided to tighten registration rules further by reviving additional elements of the Soviet propiska. The authorities attribute the crackdown to the struggle against illegal immigration, primarily from the Central Asian republics. In a populist gesture toward anti-immigration sentiment in the country, the president has decided to fight "elastic apartments," in which several thousand migrant workers can be registered in a single 50-square-meter apartment. Under the new laws, violators will face higher fines and even criminal charges.

Even Russian citizens who move from one city to another in search of better jobs are also at risk. Fines could be leveled against a husband living with his wife if she does not hold a residence permit. The same fate could await parents, children and other relatives residing in the same city but lacking the proper registration. Landlords who fail to register tenants will be slapped with higher fines, as will those who register in a residence without any intention of actually living at that address. Some officials have publicly lamented that the law does not permit confiscation of the residences of people who have not lived in them for extended periods.

The only good news is that it won't be necessary anymore for Russian citizens to comply with the irritating Soviet-era rule that required registration within three working days unless you could prove you were away on a business trip or vacation.

Interestingly, only a few years ago, the Federal Migration Service announced that it was possible for the country to eliminate propiskas and switch to a more logical system of tracking individuals that is known throughout the world to be more effective — namely, by their tax ID numbers or their social or pension insurance policies.

Of course, the Federal Migration Service knows perfectly well that the current system of linking people's registration to their place of residence is incapable of effectively carrying out a single one of the functions of that agency. It does not help reduce crime because criminals generally refrain from leaving their passport and propiskas behind. Neither does it aid in planning the social development of a given region. The actual residents in an area do

not match the list of people registered there.

What's more, residents' needs are better determined by sociologists and the free market of supply and demand rather than the migration service and the police. The ailing Russian economy urgently requires the stimulus that greater mobility of the workforce — arguably the most immobile in Europe — would bring. The last thing the country needs is a return to "Soviet serfdom." Ratcheting up registration requirements will not improve interethnic relations in the country or ease tensions between Russia and the North Caucasus. It will not even help reduce draft evasion.

Following the riot by nationalists on Moscow's Manezh Square two years ago, Vladimir Putin, the prime minister at the time, announced that it was too early to ease immigration and registration requirements. Now, in response to dissatisfaction expressed by migrant workers, Putin has taken a more conservative stance. He proposes to reinstitute additional elements of the Soviet-era registration system that are unlikely to work in the 21st century.

For example, during the 90 days that a person's registration application is under review to confirm his place of residence, he could conceivably travel around the world and within Russia several times over. It is difficult to imagine that local police officers will spend their days and evenings checking whether both spouses in a given apartment hold residence permits.

Most important, it is worth reminding those who support the Soviet institution of propiska that it did not only fail to save the Soviet Union, but it even contributed to its downfall.

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

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