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Migration Service Boosts Russia's Police State

By Nikolai Petrov

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On Aug. 1, a tent camp was set up in Moscow for several hundred Vietnamese and Tajik illegal migrants detained in raids.

In setting up the camps and the immediate decision of the administrative courts to deport the detainees, the authorities didn't particularly bother to pay attention to existing laws. At the same time, massive raids against migrant workers were held in St. Petersburg. The beating of a police officer by Dagestanis at Moscow's Matveyevsky market became the formal pretext for the state campaign against illegal migrants, just like the 2004 Beslan terrorist attack was used by President Vladimir Putin to cancel direct gubernatorial elections.

These past events show that in Russia's transformation to a police state, which experts often talk about, a special role is played by the Federal Migration Service, which is increasingly turning into a powerful political instrument.

The migration service was given passport and visa responsibilities in 2005 and now has 35,000 employees, half of which are also employed by the Interior Ministry.

In May of last year, the Federal Migration Service, which previously was part of the Interior Ministry, began reporting to the prime minister directly. In April, the head of the migration service — Konstantin Romodanovsky, a former general in the Federal Security Service — was promoted to a minister role, and the employees' wages were raised. Romodanovsky meets once every three months with Putin and his promotion to minister is a clear sign of how close he is to Putin.

Starting in January, those subject to deportation will fall under the authority of the Federal Migration Service, which will oversee 21 special institutions for detaining illegal migrants. Before the end of this year, such institutions are planned in 22 federal subjects. In total, the migration service plans to create 83 special institutes in 81 subjects and increase its staff by another 4,700 employees.

The media and blogosphere is full of speculation that the government, under the pretext of fighting "illegal migration," could set up a network of deportation camps that could be used for completely other purposes — for example, the detention of protesters and others "undesirables."

Meanwhile, the government has submitted a bill to the State Duma on "simplified procedures" for hearing court cases in which evidence will not be analyzed and witnesses won't be called. This could help increase the effectiveness of "processing" people the state wants to convict and send to prison.

As one of the key agencies responsible for entry to, exit from and movements within the country, the Federal Migration Service will play a prominent role in Russia's developing police state.

This is not the first time that the government has increased the number of law enforcement structures and incited conflicts between them. Take, for example, the sharp rivalry between the Federal Drug Control Service and the FSB, or the Investigative Committee and the Prosecutor General's Office. It is quite possible that now this is happening with the Federal Migration Service and the Interior Ministry.

Nikolai Petrov is a professor of political science at the Higher School of Economics.

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