The Moscow Times
30 YEARS
INDEPENDENT NEWS FROM RUSSIA

The Kremlin Benefits From Migrants

By Boris Kagarlitsky

October 23, 2013




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Murders stemming from domestic violence occur every week in Russia, as they do elsewhere in the world. Most in Russia go unnoticed by the public and unsolved by the police. But after the recent killing in Moscow of 25-year-old Yegor Shcherbakov, the authorities made extraordinary efforts to apprehend the culprit. They soon arrested Azeri national Orkhan Zeinalov, and journalists immediately reported that he was guilty of the murder — even before a trial has been held.

Russia's relations with Azerbaijan are a delicate balancing act as Moscow cautiously attempts to strengthen ties with Baku without alienating its longtime ally Armenia. Meanwhile, the current uproar over Zeinalov will only complicate the situation for the Kremlin. But the Kremlin is less concerned these days with relations with its former Soviet republics as it is with exploiting the sentiments of those who protested in Biryulyovo over Shcherbakov's death.

As the country's economic crisis heats up, the public has shifted its focus to the problem of migrants and away from failed government policies. One camp is politically correct and defends migrants while the other calls for pogroms against them. Either way, the authorities are happy to see people discussing this problem rather than the country's rampant corruption, high utilities fees and flawed social policies. Nor do they want a public debate over the recent reform to the Russian Academy of Sciences that has already led to disastrous consequences for education and health care, or discussion of pension reforms that have left even government officials confused about how to proceed.

If people were to focus on any of those issues, they would quickly realize that the government's measures are exacerbating the economic crisis, undermining the foundations of social order and threatening the survival of the Russian state.

Migration to Russia has reached a peak and will now decline. About 7 million people live in Tajikistan, but even if they wanted to, there is no physical way that more than 2 million of them could move to Russia. That means the number of Tajik citizens living in Russia might decrease at some point, but it cannot increase. Thus, the demographic situation, even under the most pessimistic scenario, will not get worse.

Moreover, the economy's slowdown also reduces the number of jobs that attract migrant workers. Of course, a significant number of migrants will stay in Russia and compete for the jobs that do remain, but in absolute terms the number of foreign workers coming to Russia in search of work will either decrease or at least stabilize.

It is telling that the greatest irritation has been directed at people from the Caucasus even though they are not migrants at all, but Russian citizens. To remedy what is mistakenly thought to be a "migrant problem," some officials propose introducing a visa regime with the former Soviet republics in Central Asia. In other words, they offer an illogical solution to an irrational problem.

Meanwhile, Azerbaijan has become one of the fastest-growing economies of the former Soviet republics, with its standard of living rivaling that of Russia's. The key to Azerbaijan's success is not just oil revenues but also large infrastructure projects that are quite impressive for such a small country. In the future, Azerbaijan will itself begin attracting migrants from Central Asia and possibly from Ukraine and Moldova. At that point, Azeris will probably be the ones to complain about being "besieged by foreigners."

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Original url: https://www.themoscowtimes.com/2013/10/23/the-kremlin-benefits-from-migrants-a28883