

A Global Power Can't Have Porous Borders

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In the aftermath of ethnic riots in Biryulyovo, Mayor Sergei Sobyenin has proposed searching private apartments for illegal aliens. Not only does this initiative violate the Constitution, which protects private homes from unwarranted searches and seizures, it constitutes an admission that the Russian state does not enforce its borders.

Opposition leader Alexei Navalny is collecting signatures for his petition to introduce a visa regime with the countries of Central Asia and the Caucasus as a civilized way to deal with illegal immigration.

The problem, however, is that Russia does not really have well-policed borders to be able to enforce a viable visa and immigration control regime. We allow travelers from many of the post-Soviet states to enter the country without a foreign passport, accepting all sorts of bogus travel documents, many easily forged.

Thousands of kilometers of Russia's border with Kazakhstan are open spaces, with only scattered checkpoints. Russian border guards patrol Kazakhstan's external borders with China, but Kazakh borders with neighboring Kyrgyzstan and Uzbekistan are easily penetrable. Russia's border with Azerbaijan and Georgia is better guarded against the terrorist threat in the Caucasus. There is no border with Belarus and a largely unpatrolled border with Ukraine.

The issue of making foreign passports the only valid travel documents for entry into Russia by CIS nationals was discussed in 2002 as part of Russia's commitments under the Kaliningrad transit deal with the European Union. This was to be introduced Jan. 1, 2005. In the summer of 2004, President Vladimir Putin waived this requirement as Moscow's goodwill gesture toward Ukraine to help the campaign of the pro-Russian presidential candidate, Viktor Yanukovich. Now the plans are to reintroduce this system in 2015 for those CIS states that will not join the Customs Union. Both Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan want in.

One might think that faced with a real terrorist threat, Russia would invest in modern border controls and biometric personal identification technologies, which were developed by Russian companies, to have a clear sense of who enters the country and on what grounds. But no.

Twenty-three years of independent statehood and billions of petrodollars later, Russia still lacks enforceable borders. The good news is that the head of the Federal Border Development Agency, which administers the border construction program, was forced out last week in a multibillion-ruble embezzlement case.

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