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Useless War on Migrants

By Georgy Bovt

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Russia is conducting a vigilant campaign against illegal migrants. Almost every day, television shows bombard Russians with scenes of the police frisking long lineups of scruffy migrants as they stand, legs apart and facing the wall. Or else they are shown marching in a long line, like prisoners, each with his hands placed on the shoulders of the one in front of him. They are shuffled off somewhere — perhaps to be deported or maybe just to pay bribes the moment cameras are turned off. They are treated like second-class citizens and almost always shown in a demeaning light. If the police and migration officers handle them like so many cattle even under the glare of cameras, one can only imagine what they do to them when the cameras are turned off.

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raids. They only stoke nationalist sentiments and increase the cost of bribes to keep illegal migrants employed in Russia.

The televised roundups of migrants are clearly staged to mollify public opinion following the recent anti-migrant riots in Biryulyovo and represents an attempt by the authorities to flirt openly with nationalist forces.

It costs an average of 30,000 rubles ($930) to deport a single illegal migrant. Deporting all of the nearly 2 million or so illegal migrants would thus cost about $2 billion. This does not include direct losses that mass deportations would cause to the Russian economy. After all, each of those people performs a job — even if they do not pay taxes — they produce a good or service that others are using. Even the fruit and vegetable market in Biryulyovo, which sparked the anti-migrant demonstrations there, provided more than half of all the fresh produce consumed in Moscow. If these workers are deported, how will the fruits and vegetables reach the Moscow market? Ethnic Russians will not want to fill those positions, particularly at the miserly salaries that the migrants earn.

To be sure, the problems with illegal immigration are numerous and serious, but they cannot be solved by crude public raids and crackdowns. Meanwhile, the authorities want to dismantle the current immigration system without offering a viable alternative to replace it.

Illegal migrants from Commonwealth of Independent States countries can enter Russia without any problems, as a visa is not required, but it is all but impossible for them to remain in the country legally. The creates an absurd situation: Russia first admits migrants unconditionally and then goes searching through the cellars to apprehend them later on the grounds that they are "illegal migrants."

Migrants are allowed to stay in Russia for 90 days without any special documents and can stay for up to two years if they have a work contract.

Migrants rely on assistance from members of their diaspora who can help them with everything from finding a job to issuing fake documents to become "legal" immigrants. This has led to the formation of a mafia-like shadow bureaucracy that offers its "legalization services" to millions of migrants.

They can go to the local office of the Federal Migration Service to request a "quota," or work permit. These quotas are set in advance for a one-year period, and the numbers are pulled out of thin air. Nobody in the migration services has ever studied the actual demand for labor. Very few people are actually granted the legal right to work in Russia through work permits. Law-abiding migrants from Central Asia who wait in line for hours at the migration service are likely to be told that there are no permits left. The shortage of permits is created

intentionally to fuel a profitable trade in fake permits.

These permits are usually purchased from private firms for anywhere from 9,000 rubles ($280) to 35,000 rubles ($1,080). If the migrants are caught with fake permits, they have to answer to authorities. This provides another source of income for law enforcement officials when both employers and migrants want to solve the problem without being arrested.

Migrants have no rights in Russia, giving employers a free hand to withhold their promised wages for months at a time, forcing impoverished employees to steal in order to survive.

Government authorities are well aware that every construction site or produce market employs illegal migrants. But bureaucrats at every level are willing to turn a blind eye to the problem — for a price. Previously, they demanded 50,000 rubles ($1,540) per month as a bribe from each work site employing illegal migrants. Now, with all the talk about increasing transparency and fighting corruption, the price has shot up to 200,000 rubles ($6,175) per month. But this is still cheaper than the official fine of 800,000 rubles ($24,700).

Highly publicized raids on migrants will never improve an immigration system that is rotten to the core. It only increases anti-migrant sentiments among a large percentage of Russians. In the end, however, this escalation is profitable for law enforcement officials and other bureaucrats, which explains their role in stoking these nationalist sentiments. The more this anti-migrant trend increases, the more illegal migrants and their employers are willing to pay in bribes to keep them employed in Russia.

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

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