

## Dangerous Immigrants or Dodgy Perceptions?

### THE CORRELATION BETWEEN IMMIGRATION AND CRIME IN RUSSIA

PONARS Eurasia Policy Memo No. 321

May 2014

Sergei Golunov

*Independent Scholar*

One of the key reasons for *migrantophobia* in Russia is the widely-accepted misperception of immigrants as criminals. According to this perception, certain groups of immigrants—particularly from the South Caucasus and Central Asia—are aggressive, cruel, disrespectful, violate social norms, and are prone to participating in organized crime. There are several factors that contribute to such stereotyping.

First, a significant portion of the Russian population suffers from, shall we say, poor cognitive complexity. They view immigrants and visible ethnic minorities as a homogenous group that should bear collective responsibility for singular misdeeds. This type of racial profiling has led to immigrants being wrongly equated with minority citizens especially citizens from the North Caucasus. There have even been calls for tightened visa regimes with Central Asian states in the wake of crimes committed by Russian citizens.

Second, the Russian mass media often highlights crimes committed by minorities, partly because such crimes attract readers' attention. The idea of prohibiting the mass media from mentioning a criminal's ethnicity, which has been discussed periodically by Russian politicians over the last several years, is supported by only about half of the Russian population (while 61 percent of those in the Moscow region oppose it).<sup>1</sup> Although some media sources make an effort to avoid mentioning a perpetrator's ethnicity, their choice of wording still often strongly connects a person to a certain ethnicity, often by mentioning a person's citizenship or region of origin ("a citizen of Uzbekistan" or "native of the Caucasus"). Furthermore, some radical nationalist organizations, using their own media and public relations mechanisms, accentuate crimes committed by immigrants and minorities. For example, the Movement against Illegal Immigration (DPNI), currently prohibited in Russia, posts to its website crime

---

<sup>1</sup> "Bez yedinogo obraza zhizni, no uvazhaya drug druga," Public Chamber of the Russian Federation, September 20, 2013, <http://www.oprf.ru/press/news/2013/newsitem/22561>

stories committed by immigrants, while overlooking the fact that the cases are statistically insignificant.

Third, there are government officials who contribute to the popular perception that immigrants are criminals. Certain members of parliament (especially from the Liberal Democratic Party) and governors (such as Krasnodar's Aleksander Tkachev) emphasize the close connection between immigration and crime, whether due to their own convictions or because it helps them gain popular support. Some authorities exaggerate the number of criminals stemming from immigrant groups either by appealing to vaguely-specified "expert estimations" (for example, that some diasporas specialize in organized crime) or by resorting to dubious categorizations of statistical data. And the general terminology used by officials is not productive. Some officials cite their own intuitive estimates, which overstate the criminal "contributions" of foreigners, instead of relying on statistical data. In Moscow, officials often use the misleading term *priyezhiye* ("out-of-towners") when referring to crimes committed by outsiders. In fact, *priyezhiye* include not only foreigners but Russians who are visiting from another region of the country. Such phrasing, however, influences those who do not properly privilege statistical data and are swayed by sensationalized cases of conflict between Russians and ethnic minorities.

Fourth, while individual high-profile crimes committed by immigrants and minorities reinforce a sense of insecurity among a significant part of the Russian public, there is also widespread distrust in the ability of police and other law enforcement bodies to act impartially in mediating conflicts involving minorities. Many Russians generally feel that the authorities are reluctant to find and punish perpetrators, that they shy away from fact-finding, and that they readily accept bribes from "ethnic criminals."

### **Interpretative Figures**

Statistical data on the links between immigrants and crime in Russia is not easily available or reliable. Often lost in discussion is the fact that when comparing overall crime rates to those among immigrants, it is important to take into account important sub-factors such as police reporting procedures, the magnitude and latency of specific types of crime, location, the duration of an immigrant's residency, and age and gender. The gender factor is particularly important; in Russia, approximately two-thirds of visitors from post-Soviet countries are young males, with more than half of all immigrants from Uzbekistan and Tajikistan being males between the ages of 17 and 35.

According to statistical data, in fact, immigrants commit fewer crimes when compared with the average national rate.<sup>2</sup> (In the United States, crime rates among immigrants are generally lower than the national average. The situation is different in the EU where in

---

<sup>2</sup> See *Portal pravovoy statistiki*, [http://crimestat.ru/offenses\\_chart](http://crimestat.ru/offenses_chart)

the majority of cases immigrant crime rates are higher than the average.<sup>3</sup>) The share of foreigners among Russian criminals is small: in 2012, it was just 3.5 percent. Seeing as Moscow and its surrounding region attract up to one-half of all immigrants coming to Russia, it is no wonder that the share of foreigners among criminals there is much higher on average than in the rest of Russia. In 2012, foreigners committed 21.4 percent of all crimes within the city of Moscow and 20.4 percent in Moscow's outlying regions. In addition, some of the information that is presented looks rather alarming. For example, according to Moscow prosecutor Sergei Kudeneev, foreigners were responsible for half of all rapes and one third of all robberies in Moscow in 2012.<sup>4</sup>

According to my analysis, taking into account the Russian population (143.5 million) and the number of foreigners who visited Russia in 2012, which is about 15.9 million (of which about three-fourths are citizens of CIS states), it appears that the share of criminals among foreigners is about 22.3 per 10,000 inhabitants.<sup>5</sup> The portion of criminals among post-Soviet visitors to Russia is about 26.9 per 10,000 inhabitants.<sup>6</sup> These are much lower proportions than the share of criminals among the general Russian population, which stands at about 70.4 per 10,000 inhabitants.<sup>7</sup>

Admittedly, it would be premature to conclude that immigrants are less likely to commit crimes than native-born Russian citizens. First, the data on the number of foreigners entering Russia annually is probably overestimated, mostly due to mistakes made by border guards (who might log an immigrant/visitor as "new" when the person has visited multiple times during a year) or by police officers (when they register immigrants at their place of residence). Second, many labor migrants enter Russia on a temporary basis, meaning that a typical foreign visitor may spend less time in Russia annually than the average Russian citizen. Third, crimes within immigrant communities, as well as crimes committed against immigrants, go widely unreported because immigrants are often afraid to contact authorities—the primary fear being that they would be found in violation of some law. Finally, a general comparison of the overall crime rate is not as informative as a comparison of specific categories of crimes, such as violent or property crimes. Interestingly enough, when looking at the data, the most

---

<sup>3</sup> See, for example, R. Martinez, J. Stowell, "Extending Immigration and Crime Studies: National Implications and Local Settings," *The Annals of the American Academy of Political and Social Science*, 641 (1), 2012, 174-191, and L. M. Solivetti, "Looking for a Fair Country: Features and Determinants of Immigrants' Involvement in Crime in Europe," *The Howard Journal*, 51 (2), 2012, 133-159.

<sup>4</sup> "Prokuror Moskvy: Polovina iznasilovaniy i tret' grabezhey sovershaiutsya migrantami," *RBK*, February 1, 2013, <http://www.rbc.ru/rbcfreenews/20130201105732.shtml/>

<sup>5</sup> See "Svedeniya po migratsionnoy situatsii v Rossii'skoy Federatsii za 2012 god," Federal Migration Service, <http://www.fms.gov.ru/about/statistics/data/details/53595/>; Tatiana Sokolova, "Rossii nevygodno vvodit' vizovyi rezhim so stranami SNG," *The Epoch Times*, December 2, 2013, <http://www.epochtimes.ru/content/view/81563/3/>

<sup>6</sup> Calculated from *Portal pravovoy statistiki*, [http://crimestat.ru/offenses\\_chart](http://crimestat.ru/offenses_chart)

<sup>7</sup> *Ibid.*

widespread type of crime committed by immigrants is forgery of residency and work documents.<sup>8</sup>

Some of the more widely-reported violent clashes with an ethnic component had no bearing on crime rates. Regional crimes in Yandyki in 2005, Kondopoga in 2006, Sagra in 2011, and Pugachyov in 2013 were committed by just a handful of people who had the capacity to mobilize local inhabitants along ethnic lines. When the actual crimes are placed in context they are statistically insignificant. Concerning acts of terrorism like the suicide attacks in Volgograd in 2013, these are typically committed by native-born Russian citizens. Such crimes have no effect on or relation to a locality's overall crime statistics, but they strongly contribute to anti-immigrant sentiment.

### **Responses**

Given that a large portion of the Russian public confuses immigrants with ethnic minorities, restricting immigration is the most straightforward response to the perceived increase in the rate of crimes committed by ethnic minorities. The public demands the toughening of immigration policies each time an ethnic-related conflict occurs, particularly when committed against an ethnic Russian. Many opposition activists (including Alexey Navalny) have used perceived ethnic crime issues to undermine the ruling regime and to mobilize supporters.

The government also manipulates the issue. This was revealed in 2013 and at the beginning of 2014 when the government amended immigration rules and implemented massive deportations. One result of these reforms was that nationals of all countries that are part of the visa-free regime with Russia are only allowed to stay in Russia for up to 90 days per 180-day period (unless they have valid work permits), and leaving and re-entering the country no longer resets the person's status. Of note, as of 2011, citizens of Belarus and Kazakhstan, countries that are part of the Eurasian Economic Community, have the same employment rights as Russian citizens and do not have to obtain work permits.

Strengthened government immigration policies, however, can lead to serious side effects. For example, many immigrants might decide to stay in Russia illegally, which would limit their legal flow of income, adversely affect tax revenue, and even drive them into illegal or criminal occupations.

Apart from improving the overall social conditions for immigrants, one of the main alternatives to tightening immigration controls could be aiding the police to be more effective with their work in communities that have many immigrants and ethnic minorities. Unfortunately, the infamously corrupt Russian police are trusted neither by

---

<sup>8</sup> *Federal'naya migratsionnaya sluzhba*, <http://www.fms.gov.ru/about/statistics/foreign/details/54891/>

immigrants and minorities nor by the general public. There is no systematic cooperation between police and minority groups, no telephone help-lines in minority languages, and no employing of representatives of ethnic minorities in police forces that patrol ethnic communities. Instead, Russian police units prefer to work with so-called “diaspora leaders” who are heads of ethnocultural organizations and more often than not represent the commercial, private, or even criminal interests of their leaders rather than the interests of their respective communities.

## Conclusion

There is a distorted perception in Russia of the connection between immigration and crime. Immigrants are seen not only as more prone to criminal behavior than native Russians (especially ethnic Russians), but they are often connected to criminal acts committed by representatives of any ethnic minority regardless of the latter’s citizenship status.

Statistics suggest that foreigners commit crimes with less frequency than Russian citizens. Even if we allow that the data is vulnerable to inaccuracies, we have no statistical basis to argue the opposite. Unfortunately, the alarmist part of the Russian public, while being skeptical about statistical data, is heavily influenced by biased mass media coverage of crimes, particularly by isolated high-profile criminal cases involving minorities and “ethnic” Russians.

The Russian government responds to public alarmism by toughening immigration policies, even though this approach can lead to the further marginalization of immigrants and their redirection into criminal activities. And the arm of the government that deals with crime and immigrant-related issues on a day-to-day basis, the police, are corrupt and not trusted by anyone.

The policy recommendation presented here, as a first step for Russia to deal with its *migrantophobia*, is for law enforcement to increase cooperative efforts with immigrant communities. Municipalities need to develop community-oriented policing approaches. Whether we can expect such a fundamental change in approach to happen anytime soon is another matter.