

A Great Wall for Russia?

THE CONSEQUENCES OF INTRODUCING A VISA REGIME FOR THE CIS

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Serghei Golunov

Hokkaido University

Ranked second in the world in terms of net in-migration, Russia welcomes across its borders mainly residents of the Commonwealth of Independent States (CIS), especially from Azerbaijan, Kyrgyzstan, Moldova, Tajikistan, Ukraine, and Uzbekistan. Citizens from CIS states can currently enter Russia quite easily as they do not need visas,¹ although most of them (excluding Belarusians) are allowed to stay in Russia for only 90 consecutive days within a 180-day period if they are not eligible to work in Russia legally. Once in Russia, however, many fail to properly register due to the complicated and often corrupt bureaucratic procedures involved. The total number of these immigrants is difficult to gauge due to their frequent cross-border travel and inaccurate Russian recordkeeping. Estimates range widely, from five to 20 million.

In Russia, some politicians and commentators have actively called for the introduction of a visa regime directed toward foreign nationals from CIS states, particularly those with a markedly different cultural background (primarily Muslim) from Central Asia and the South Caucasus. The idea of a visa regime for at least Central Asia has served as a bridge for liberals and nationalists as they join together in the struggle against Vladimir Putin's regime. Last year Alexei Navalny, a prominent opposition leader, brought the issue into the spotlight when it became a key plank of his Moscow mayoral campaign.

This memo examines the probable consequences for Russia of introducing a visa regime for its CIS partners.

Debunking the Benefits of a Visa Regime

Russian proponents of a visa regime believe that large-scale labor migration from certain CIS states poses a serious challenge for Russia. They say that it leads to a rapid rise in

¹ Russia has a visa regime with Georgia and Turkmenistan, neither of which are in the CIS.

the non-ethnic Russian population, a dramatic increase in crime rates, an exacerbation of ethnic conflicts, and even the spread of infectious disease. Supporters of a visa regime argue that immigrants take jobs away from local populations and indirectly contribute to an increase in crime and corruption in some sectors of the economy.

Such arguments, however, are either disputable or flatly incorrect. First, the demographic fears are overstated. The combined population of Armenia, Azerbaijan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, and Uzbekistan is just about 40 percent of Russia's population. Moreover, most migrant CIS workers can enter and exit Russia quite easily and are predominantly interested in earning money, remitting it to their home countries, and eventually settling down in the latter.

Second, statistical data does not support the argument that a rise in migration leads to a correspondent increase in crime. In recent years, the contribution of CIS foreign nationals toward Russia's crime rate has hovered at slightly above three percent, significantly less than the proportion of CIS migrants to the Russian population.² True, in Moscow and the region surrounding it, CIS nationals account for more than 20 percent of crimes, and up to 40 percent in some types of crime such as rape.³ But Moscow and its suburbs also attract up to half of all CIS labor migrants coming to Russia, with young males, the demographic most prone to engage in criminal activity, making up the majority. As migrants continue to fill positions of hard labor, there is not much hope that replacing foreign workers with domestic ones representing the same age-sex demographic would lead to a decline in crime rates.

Third, there is no basis for the assumption that an increase in labor migrants from Central Asia or elsewhere will lead to an escalation of ethnic conflict. It is not Central Asians but rather North Caucasians – citizens of Russia – who are most often implicated in high-profile ethnic conflicts with ethnic Russians.

Finally, although some migrants may indeed be carriers of infectious disease, they have never been said to cause any large-scale epidemics. In any case, the risk of an infectious disease should not be associated with the number of people entering the country; a single infected visitor with a valid visa could be enough to start a health crisis.

The question of whether immigrants are taking jobs away from Russian citizens is more complex. Supporters of a visa regime will argue that it is sensible to try and encourage domestic workers from Russia's disadvantaged regions to relocate to Moscow and other more prosperous areas of the country where they could take jobs now being held mostly by migrants. Responding to the claim that Russian workers would not be satisfied with

² According to data of the Federal Immigration Service, 8.8 million CIS nationals were in Russia as of the end of August 2013. See Federal Migration Service, <http://www.fms.gov.ru/about/statistics/foreign/details/54891/>

³ Calculated via the Russian general prosecutor's *Portal of Legal Statistics*, http://crimestat.ru/offenses_rate

the lower salaries to which foreign migrants are accustomed, visa regime supporters argue that employers currently take advantage of migrants' lack of rights, confiscating large portions of their wages. If their salaries were paid in full, they would be high enough to satisfy Russian workers.⁴

The mobility of Russian workers, however, is insufficiently high to entirely replace foreign labor. In 2011, for example, only 2.5 million Russians worked outside their home regions. In general, most Russian nationals will not be prepared to relocate and live in the extremely poor conditions available to most labor migrants. Moreover, among the top ten regions of Russia with the highest unemployment, nine are republics in the North Caucasus where ethnic non-Russians prevail (the tenth is Adygeia, also in the North Caucasus but with a majority ethnic Russian population). Those nationalists who advocate replacing foreign migrants with domestic workers from disadvantaged regions might take pause if they realized the latter's likely place of origin. Finally, Moscow itself still has a low unemployment rate and provides plenty of work opportunities for Russian nationals and migrants alike.

Before taking the fateful step of introducing a visa regime for CIS states, authorities should thus consider at least organizing pilot projects designed to replace external workforces with internal labor migrants. In 2012, the city of St. Petersburg proposed just this, though it was never put into practice. If such an experiment went forward in Russia's second largest city, Russian society would be able to properly judge what the results of such a policy might entail for other major urban centers.

Understanding the Cons of a Visa Regime

A visa regime would not automatically limit migration from the states that it would target. Up to several hundred thousand labor migrants may already have Russian citizenship. For others, obtaining a working visa might prove beneficial, as it could help shelter them from arbitrary police treatment. For the vast majority of migrants who would have difficulty obtaining visas, however, there would be a strong temptation not to leave the country and risk repeating the visa application process one more time. By tightening immigration policy, the Russian government may paradoxically encourage more migrants to permanently settle in Russia.

Those who choose to settle in Russia illegally will find themselves with even less rights than at present. Many are likely to seek out any source of income they can, even if it leads to slavery or involvement in criminal activity.

⁴ During his mayoral campaign, Alexei Navalny gave an example of wage irregularities when he said that corrupt municipal officials steal large portions of the salaries of migrant janitors. See Aleksandr Labykin, "Kak ne vrat, chtoby ne vorovat," <http://expert.ru/2013/08/16/o-chem-govorit-s-narodom-navalnyj/>

If the vacancies that result from a sharp decrease in the number of foreign labor migrants are not filled quickly by a domestic workforce, it could have a negative impact on various economic sectors, including the curtailing of agricultural production and a corresponding rise in prices, as well as a decline in road construction. Even if the migrant labor force could be replaced, the cost of providing for a domestic workforce (and, subsequently, the goods and services provided) would be significant, as it would require higher salaries and better living conditions for workers. For some employers, alcoholism—more widespread among native Russians than Central Asian nationals—could become a serious problem.

Imposing a visa regime on primarily Muslim states could also provoke disapproval from Russian Muslim republics like Tatarstan that would resent the targeting of their co-religionists.

If it introduces a visa regime, Russia will most likely need to create a costly high-capacity infrastructure to process visa applications in the affected CIS states. Such a bureaucracy is laborious for any country to develop, and it is not clear that Russia would be able to manage the process as successfully as Finland, for example, which, through trial and error, has managed to create an efficient system capable of processing more than one million visa applications annually from Russia. If Russian consulate offices in CIS states were unable to cope with the expected volume of visa applications, it could provoke consular officers to establish corrupt relations with shadow intermediaries advocating for the interests of those who would like to receive visas quickly and/or avoid existing restrictions.

If many migrants who do not have the opportunity to work in Russia also fail to find work in neighboring Kazakhstan (which has a much smaller labor market than Russia), it could lead to disastrous social and political consequences for Kyrgyzstan, Uzbekistan, and Tajikistan, where unemployment is a major problem. Only for Azerbaijan are the prospects better, as it has a growing economy and an increasing number of its labor migrants now prefer to work in Turkey.

Facing the difficult problem of offering employment to hundreds of thousands of their citizens who have lost the opportunity to work in Russia, affected Central Asian governments could be strongly tempted to take revenge on Moscow. Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan could choose to withdraw from the Collective Security Treaty Organization and/or terminate the Russian military presence in their countries. A visa regime could also cause a rapid strengthening of China's economic, political, and military position in Central Asia, as well as its domination of the Shanghai Cooperation Organization.

Alternatively, the affected Central Asian states, unable to cope with growing social unrest, could descend into a state of chaos or become prey to nationalist or Islamic radicals. Growing anti-Russian sentiment could prove dangerous for ethnic Russian

populations within these states, forcing Moscow to accept rising numbers of refugees. A worsening in Russian-Azerbaijani relations, in particular, could also aggravate the situation surrounding Nagorno-Karabakh and exacerbate tensions in areas populated by Lezgins living on both sides of the border.

Closing legal channels for a huge number of Central Asian nationals to enter Russia could also lead to the emergence of numerous illegal migration channels through the poorly controlled Russian-Kazakhstani border. As the U.S. experience shows, it can be quite difficult to cope with an intensive cross-border flow of illegal migrants even by means of border fences and advanced technologies. Russia would need maximal assistance from Kazakhstan to fortify their shared border and would also need to request that Kazakhstan itself introduce visa regimes for bordering Uzbekistan and Kyrgyzstan. While the threat of an increasing number of labor migrants might push Kazakhstan to accede to such steps, Astana could resent Moscow for indirectly compelling it to take on such costly and controversial projects.

Of course, Russia might not implement visa regimes for Azerbaijan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, and Uzbekistan all at once. To begin with, it could target the largest sources of Central Asian labor migrants: Uzbekistan and/or Tajikistan. It could also simply target Azerbaijan, in an attempt to curtail widespread anti-Caucasus sentiment inside Russia. These more limited options, however, would still leave most of the abovementioned problems unaddressed and additionally insult the leaders of those states that were affected, possibly provoking them to take countermeasures against Russia in response.

Conclusion

Introducing visa regimes toward select CIS states will lead to a number of undesirable consequences for Russia. At the very least, Russian lawmakers will have to deal with a deficit in the workforce, rising prices for various goods and services, an increased number of permanent illegal residents, a diminishing of Moscow's influence throughout Central Asia and the South Caucasus, an increase in bureaucratic expenses, and the need to fortify Russia's border with Kazakhstan. Considering all this, should the introduction of visa regimes continue growing in popularity, the Russian government should at least try to conduct initial regional experiments that replace migrant labor with a domestic workforce in order to assess the impact of such a policy before taking more drastic nationwide steps.