

Migration of Ukrainians to Russia in 2014–2015

Written by Vladimir Mukomel

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VLADIMIR MUKOMEL, MAY 4 2017

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Migration flows between Ukraine and Russia have always been high, but they increased particularly in the 2000s when Russia became one of the main directions for labour migrants from Ukraine. As of 2 February 2014, shortly before the Ukraine crisis began, there were 1.6 million Ukrainian citizens living in Russia. Labour migrants, chiefly circular, comprised two thirds of this number. Since Ukrainian labour migrants do not belong to 'visible minorities' that are targets of xenophobia, they did not attract a particular attention from Russians. If the issue of labour migration from Ukraine began to be discussed among Russian society, it happened solely due to the influx of migrants from the east of Ukraine.

The large influx of individuals seeking asylum in Russia began in July 2014 when the most intensive hostilities evolved. By the end of 2014 (data from 5 December 2014) the number of Ukrainian citizens who stayed in the territory of Russia increased by more than 0.9 million and went up to 2.5 million persons.[1] Deterioration of living conditions in the territory of the so-called Novorossiia and bitter fighting which flared up in the region of Debal'tsevo and Mariupol in January–February 2015, further increased the number of people who fled from the war. By March 2015 the number of Ukrainian citizens in Russia increased to 2.6 million and afterwards stabilised at that level.

The necessary help was provided to the people who left Ukraine[2] and the migrants were offered preferential treatment. The local populations perceived the support ambiguously, particularly in the near-border regions where many natives from Ukraine had relatives and friends. How were the problems of people who left Ukraine covered by mass media and articulated by the authorities? What discourses dominated? And how did the recipient population react to the influx of people seeking asylum? This chapter seeks to address these questions.

Methodology

The study is based on the following data: 1) Automated real-time media monitoring and analysis called Medialogia information and analytical system; 2) Sociological studies carried out by the Institute of Sociology of the Russian Academy of Sciences in summer and autumn of 2015. These included 40 focus groups and 25 in-depth interviews, conducted in five regions of Russia, with the local and migrant youth aged between 20 and 29 years, belonging to the higher strata of the middle class and the lower class[3]; 3) Data collected in the course of the Russia Longitudinal Monitoring Survey, RLMS-HSE. The twenty-fourth wave of RLMS-HSE was conducted between October 2015 and February 2016 and included 18,400 respondents[4]; 4) Department statistics of the FMS (the Central Database of Foreign Citizens' and Stateless Persons' Registration).

Dominant Discourses in Russia

The issue of refugees has been considered by the producers of the discourse (first of all the mass media and political

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figures) in the context of the assessment of Russia's actions in Crimea and south-east Ukraine. The cleavage within Russian society ran along the *pro et contra* line.

In the news and information programmes controlled by the state, compassion toward people who left Ukraine was accompanied by references to 'Kyiv junta', 'Fascists' and 'Bandera's followers' who were accused of waging 'war against their own people'. Federal TV channels every day transmitted talk-shows on Ukraine where the above terms were used. Few liberal mass media attempted to present an alternative version of the events.

Personalities of mass culture who have had an enormous influence on the formation of public opinion were also divided on the matter.[5] When the popular singer Andrei Makarevich sang to the children of Ukrainian refugees in Ukraine, cultural figures[6] as well as the authorities turned against him and imposed a secret ban on his music performances and those of other singers who opposed the war. Some State Duma members suggested depriving Makarevich of all his titles and state rewards. Later, a suggestion to deprive Makarevich of Russian citizenship followed (Vesti.ru 2014; Izvestia 2015).

The discourse of authorities that backed the mass media propaganda campaign had two main components: the articulation of messages conveyed by propagandists ('citizens of Ukraine... are fleeing from the enemy which turned out to be the army of their own country' – as Sergey Naryshkin, the speaker of the Russian parliament stated, TASS 2014) and the demonstration of their actions' success ('It was done quietly, with no political outcry, buzz, and scandals. The people [refugees] are accommodated, the people work, their children take classes', RIA Novosti 2015).

The civil society was also split. On the one hand, the pro-government Public Chamber reproduced propaganda messages of success[7], but on the other hand the Council for Human Rights under the President of Russia focused on the socio-economic problems of Ukrainian refugees. It drafted a well-researched report, many recommendations of which were implemented (The Consolidated Report 2014).

For all parties involved in the dispute the issue of refugees was just a pretext to influence the public. The struggle for the man in the street began in the summer of 2014 when the influx of people from Eastern Ukraine sharply rose. Of 70,000 publications in mass media and the Internet between June 2014 and June 2016 related to people who fled Ukraine, 64 per cent were written between June and September 2014 and 22 per cent between October 2014 and May 2015. Subsequently, the attention of the media in relation to refugees fell drastically; according to Medialogia only 9 per cent of publications on the issue appeared in the period from June to November 2015 and mere 5 per cent of publications in the period between December 2015 and June 2016.

The interest in the problems of refugees rose in times of active hostilities when the attention of the media was drawn to Ukraine, and fell after the conclusion of the Minsk and Minsk-2 agreements. The change in policy with respect to Ukrainian migrants at the end of 2015 played an important role in the decline of the media's interest in refugees. Namely, special privileges were abandoned and the requirements to legalise a refugee's stay in the territory of Russia were made more stringent. As a result, the continuation of a propaganda campaign was no longer needed.

The issue of migrants from Ukraine split internet communities too. About 460 thematic groups related to helping Ukrainians who had fled to Russia were formed on social networks. These groups organised fundraising and in-kind support for the displaced individuals as well as advertised job and accommodation offers. The expression 'help for refugees'[8] stood at the level of 105,000–115,000 of requests made in retrieval systems throughout summer months of 2014 (Public Chamber 2014b, 10). At the same time, from the summer of 2014 onwards groups that were actively opposed to people who came from Ukraine formed online via patriotic websites (for instance <http://politicus.ru>, <http://pravda.ru> etc.). Headlines of articles published on those websites provide a good summary of their content and include the following: 'Unfortunately, many refugees from Donetsk region proved to be cads, swindlers, and bottom-feeders' (politicus.ru 2014a) and 'The Ukrainian refugees: brothers or freeloaders?' (Pravda.ru 2014). Specialised blogs under symptomatic names 'We are against #Ukrainian refugees in Russia!!!', using foul language, were created.

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The issue of people who fled from Ukraine attracted attention of scientific circles as early as 2014. The first publications were written predominantly by specialists from the Russian regions closest to Ukraine: Belgorod, Rostov and Volgograd. Later, the circle of authors had expanded up to Primorski region. The influx of refugees is considered in these publications in the context of challenges to security and social stability (Popova, Timofeeva 2015, Boiko 2015), communications (Borisova 2014, Olenitskaya 2015, Golub', Timofeeva 2015) regional finances (Vergun 2014) and socio-psychological and economic aspects of adaptation (Golub', Bezrukova et al. 2015, Yakimov et.al 2015).

Perception of Forced Migrants from Ukraine by the Receiving Population

The first wave of people who left the east of Ukraine settled in regions located close to the border: Rostov, Belgorod, Voronezh and Crimea. According to Konstantin Romodanovsky, the Director of the Federal Migration Service of Russia, over 80 per cent of the 515,000 inhabitants of east Ukraine who arrived to Russia between 1 April 2014 and 21 July 2014, stayed in the near-border territories (RF Government 2014). Striving to avoid gathering of migrants from east Ukraine in these regions, the authorities organised migrants' movement to other areas, up to the Far East, the Kaliningrad exclave, the Volga basin and to the Urals. At the same time, a ban on accommodating refugees in the near-border regions, Moscow, Saint Petersburg and some other areas was imposed.

The first migrants from Ukraine were received with a genuine enthusiasm on the part of Russian citizens, which was fed by vigorous propaganda spread by state media. With Ukrainian refugees arriving to other regions of Russia, the enthusiasm of Russian citizens has decreased. In 2014 the share of Russians who spoke in favour of providing the migrants from Ukraine with all necessities and propitious living conditions decreased considerably, from 50 per cent in July to 40 per cent in September. The share of respondents who thought that it was necessary to send refugees back to Ukraine as soon as conditions were favourable increased from 39 per cent in July to 45 per cent in September (VCIOM 2014).

The influx of refugees has affected the everyday life of the recipient population, particularly in the regions of Russia near the borders: 'The Ukrainians have settled in all our yards' (Belgorod). The attitude of the part of migrants who think that the recipient population is bound to help them provoked rejection: 'The Ukrainians think that because their country is ravaged by war it is precisely we who ought to help them' (Belgorod); and 'As if somebody owes them' (Kaluga).

Migrants have been accused of taking the jobs of local people and contributing to the decrease of local salaries: 'Our people who are looking for jobs cannot find employment because refugees are the first ones who are hired' (Rostov). The authorities' demand to provide the refugees with employment caused discontent: 'I work at a state institution... and we were obliged to allocate between ten and 15 per cent of jobs to Ukrainians' (Rostov); 'When it was ordered to allocate jobs for refugees from Ukraine our people were just fired. The administration simply found some pretext and fired people' (Belgorod).

Many local inhabitants were irritated by claims put forward by some migrants and by their willingness to live at other people's or the state's expense: 'We are refugees and you have to provide housing, prosperity, jobs for us; you have to do everything for us. It is certainly a problem' (Crimea).

The lack of gratitude on the part of refugees was also widely emphasised by respondents: 'My boss helps orphan homes, brings clothes there... And they [refugees] scrutinise these clothes and say: what did you bring to us? We will not wear these clothes. At first we feel pity for refugees and then...we felt no pity' (Kaluga).

Some refugees aroused bewilderment and doubts in their genuineness among local inhabitants: 'A taxi driver from Donetsk said: well, I have come here and I want to get an apartment at the southern coast of Crimea' (Crimea).

Local people accused refugees of contributing to the overcrowding of pre-school institutions and universities: 'The refugees get places in children care centres while local people do not get places for their children' (Belgorod); 'People grumble not so much against migrants taking their jobs as against them taking places in schools and higher

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education institutions' (Rostov); 'The fact that refugees get places in schools and higher education institutions provokes greater talks' (Rostov). The last claim is true, as the government has created preferential conditions for migrants from Ukraine. Moreover, local people have complained about refugees begging: 'Refugees go door to door and say: "I am a refugee, give me alms please"' (Belgorod).

An opinion that more is being done for refugees than for the local people has become widespread: 'People got angry not so much with refugees as with our state because refugees got subsidies and everything as if we, local inhabitants, were not humans' (Kaluga). Surveys carried out in the Volgograd region demonstrate that irrespective of amiable or negative attitude to refugees, respondents were convinced that the state behaved better towards refugees than its own citizens. 75 per cent of respondents shared this opinion (Golub', Timofeeva 2015, 67).

The state-imposed methods of supporting refugees have been clumsy. The supposedly voluntary, but in fact compulsory, nature of this help has caused particular concern among the recipient population. Employees of state-funded organisations came across dubious practices: '... a daily earning was taken from every employee as a help to refugees' (Belgorod). Such practices (taking away from one group in order to give to another) are unthinkable in other countries, and naturally raised concerns among those affected in the Russian Federation '... it has to be done not in a compulsory way but on a voluntary basis' (Kaluga).

Rumours that a daily allowance of 800 RUB (at that time the sum was the equivalent of about 23 USD) was allocated to every refugee caused a particular frustration. Comments from the internet are illustrative: 'A friend of mine works at a plant. Now they have to work two days a week for free in order to pay 800 roubles daily allowance to refugees' (We are against it... 2014). However, it was a misapprehension, as the money was allocated to the maintenance of migrants in temporary accommodation facilities, their food, transport and running of facilities.

Migrants were accused of unwillingness to work and of having excessive and unreasonable demands from the host community: 'The refugees say "But Vladimir Putin promised us?" They think that we owe them something' (Belgorod); 'Moms with children must come and not fathers in rough and tough cars. Let men protect their motherland. And they fear doing that' (Belgorod).

Accusations that the massive influx of refugees has led to the increase in criminal activity have been widespread; 'They plundered the local church... These people have nothing sacred'; 'They do nothing. They steal hens and pigs from their neighbours' (Rostov). 'Yes, Ukrainians pillaged. That really occurred'; 'It was the first wave of refugees. People say it was the most dreadful wave'; '... people who were stealing in Ukraine, now came to us' (Belgorod). Increased criminal activity is not an unusual outcome when a society is unable to fully integrate refugees. In some instances, it is a media effect: local media outlets may single out refugee activities while omitting similar reporting with regard to the general population. Even though the accusations are unlikely to be pure fiction, it is still a far cry from objective reporting.

On their part, migrants have complained about the difficulties finding jobs and housing. They have displayed four main reactions to the anti-migrant resentment. The first one was that of acknowledgment that some of the complaints of the local population have been substantiated: 'It is simply unpleasant to hear that because local people do not know what we had experienced... Yet the greater part of the population is loyal to us and understands us...' (Belgorod). The second reaction is that of 'deafness', reflecting resignation: 'Trivial matters not worthy of acute conflicts, it is silly'; 'Well, they have said and made their point, it is no big deal' (Belgorod). The third position is a position of agreement that there are serious problems with the behaviour of some fellow-countrymen: 'We ourselves are the source of problems' (Ukrainians from Belgorod).

The fourth position is very similar to the position of local residents' majority. It is characteristic for those Ukrainians who have settled down in Russia and received Russian citizenship. The proponents of the fourth position blame the newcomers for the deterioration of their living conditions: 'The most important thing is: their coming should not create problems for us' (Belgorod). At the same time, local Ukrainians have been dissatisfied with the need to turn down claims of relatives who live in Ukraine: 'All relatives in Ukraine think that we have to support them, that we have to dispatch something to them, remit money to them... They think we owe them' (Ukrainians from Belgorod).

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However, when comparing the situation in Russia and in Ukraine, many Ukrainian refugees have expressed gratitude to inhabitants of Belgorod: 'There is a lot of kind and sympathetic people here. I meet primarily good people'; 'The people are simply good and less prone to conflicts' (Ukrainians from Belgorod).

Conclusion

For many years, Russians were open to Ukrainians and saw them as desirable neighbours. However, in recent years the attitudes have deteriorated: in the course of a longitudinal poll of 18,400 respondents, 16.2 per cent expressed negative attitudes towards the idea of having Ukrainian neighbours and 25.5 per cent of respondents expressed negative attitude to the possibility of having a Ukrainian boss.[9] Thus, there is evidence to suggest that the recent geopolitical changes have had negative consequences on the ability to maintain good relations between the two nationalities.

The recipient population's attitude towards Ukrainian migrants and Ukrainians in general began to worsen between 2014 and 2015; 14 per cent of respondents were ready to restrict Ukrainians' residence in the territory of Russia in August 2015 (versus five per cent in October 2013 and eight per cent in July 2014) (Levada-Center 2016). This shift in the public opinion can lead to more serious social problems, if the tension between Ukrainian refugees and the local population continues. There are some steps that could be taken to ameliorate this situation. First, those Ukrainians who intend to go back home, should adapt to the Russian realities while awaiting the change of circumstances in Ukraine. This means that they need a job, housing, and schooling for children within a Russian reality in which people rely predominantly on themselves. Second, people who came from south-east Ukraine and who do not intend to go back, as they connect their future with Russia, must be better integrated into the Russian society to avoid the negative social consequences associated with a factionalised society lacking in tolerance, empathy, and the ability to co-exist.

Notes

[1] Hereinafter references are made to data of the Central Database of Foreign Citizens and Stateless Persons' Registration of the Federal Migration Service of Russia (FMS).

[2] The Government of the Russian Federation allocated 4.94 billion RUB (about 140 million USD) as early as July 2014.

[3] Studies were carried out within the framework of a project supported by the Russian Scientific Fund, grant #15-18-00138.

[4] Russia Longitudinal Monitoring survey, RLMS-HSE conducted by the National Research University Higher School of Economics and Demoscope closed joint-stock company together with Carolina Population Center, University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill and the Institute of Sociology of the Russian Academy of Sciences. The RLMS-HSE is a series of nationally representative surveys designed to monitor the effects of health and economic welfare reforms on households and individuals in the Russian Federation.

[5] One pole is represented by Aleksey Kortnev ('inflamed with the fraternal love the people applauds the fraternal war') and the other by the song 'Our Cossacks go, go through Slavyansk' which was changed into 'And our Cossacks will reach Kharkov... and Kiev' (the song was propagandised as the 'Hymn of the Russian spring').

[6] A quotation from a song by Andrey Makarevich ('My former brothers have obediently become helminths').

[7] Speaking of people coming from south-east Ukraine Vladimir Slepak, the member of the Russian Federation Public Chamber, said: 'The genuine gist of events will be understood in all countries of the world and people will rally against mendacious Ukrainian politicians who wage war against their own people. The world public will finally discern outright fascists in Ukrainian nationalists' [Public Chamber 2014a]. See also [Public Chamber 2015].

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[8] In the Russian discourse, all those who came from the south-east of Ukraine were treated as refugees regardless of their status.

[9] RLMS-HSE, 24 wave

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