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Migration Scholarship in post-Soviet Russia: Between Western approaches and Eurasian geographies

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Integratsiya migrantov: Kontseptsii i praktiki [Integration of migrants: Concepts and practices]

Moscow: Mysl, 2015, 318 roubles (hbk) (ISBN: 978-5-244-01174-6), 267 pp.

Vladimir Mukomel (ed.)

Migranty, migrantofobii i migratsionnaja politika [Migrants, migrantophobia and migration policies]

Moscow: Academia, 2014, 365 roubles (pbk) (ISBN: 5-87514-865-1), 245 pp.

O.D. Vorobyova and A.V. Topilin (eds.)

Mnogolikaja migratsiia [The many faces of migration]

Moscow: Ekon-inform, 2014, 264 roubles (pbk) (ISBN: 978-5-9506-1132-2), 261 pp.

Sergei Panarin (ed.)

Vostok na Vostoke, v Rossii i na Zapade: Transgranichnye migratsii i diaspori [East in the East, in Russia and in the West: Cross-border migrations and diasporas]

St Petersburg: Nestor-Istoria, 2016, 658 roubles (hbk) (ISBN: 978-5-4469-0883-7), 304 pp.

Introduction

This review explores Russian academic debates around migration, highlighting theoretical, empirical and policy issues which are specific to the Former Soviet Union (FSU). In global terms, FSU migration volumes are high: the Ukraine-Russia migration corridors are second only to those straddling the border between Mexico and the United States. Russia's wealthiest regions are the primary destinations of both internal and FSU migrants. In line with global trends, the response by host countries' populations and authorities is one of hostility informed by media-fuelled xenophobia. The chaotic and disruptive nature of post-socialist transformations has buffered the effects and lessened the perception of the multiple crises which have enveloped the European Union in the last decade. Eurasian integration and the

rift with the West have produced different economic and political conjunctures, whose defining moments are the Ukrainian conflict, Western sanctions and worsening terms of trade for key exports. In Russia, migration debates have focused on FSU-specific emergencies including demographic unbalances, the repatriation of the Russian diaspora and the prospects of large scale Central Asian migration.

Migration processes, their subjective understanding as well as Russian policies directed at them, have been informed by the long history of mobility across the Eurasian space. FSU migrants who make up the vast majority of Russia's migrant population still view the latter as 'a common house' (Gribinyuk in Vorobyova and Topolin 2014: 176), a transnational space open to all FSU citizens irrespective of current nationality. Conversely, borders between newly independent states are perceived as artificial administrative barriers to circulation. Uncertainties about individual legal entitlements blur the distinction between citizens and migrant foreigners. Policies are affected by sudden changes in inter-state relations. The treatment of Russia's immigrants from its FSU neighbours is made dependent on the state of Russia's relations with their titular nations. High levels of informality entail gaps between formal stipulations and informal practices. Bribery and corruption affect local authorities and law-enforcement agencies' engagements with migrants and their employers, producing tolerance towards illegality but also harassment of perfectly legal migrants.

These theoretical and political tensions are reflected in academic debates torn between the assimilation of Western approaches and the development of post-Soviet or Eurasian ideas about migration. This review explores such tensions across key themes in some of the most recent Russian-language books about migration. These volumes stand out for displaying a broad spectrum of original research by leading scholars in the field. The themes include Russian-language notions of migration, discrimination against Central Asia's migrants, and Russian migration policies.

'Common house' and 'cultural distance': Conceptualising post-Soviet migration

Migration represents a new field of study in Russia. Many scholars have therefore been drawn to approaches of old immigration countries as an essential point of departure. Echoing prevailing views in Russia, Panarin (2016) and Malakhov (2015), make a case for this country's exceptionalism regarding the notion of what constitutes a border, with radical implications for the way migration is conceptualised.

The Western understanding of international migration is primarily a political-juridical one, founded on the notion that migration relates to the experience of crossing the border of nation-states. Contemporary Russia, however, like its Czarist and Soviet predecessors, is not a nation state. First, because its population includes almost one hundred ethnic groups; second, because these people's national identity is still in flux straddling across Russian, Slavic and Soviet legacies; third, because its elites conceive of the country as a civilizational centre, a 'moral' state devoted to preserving and expanding a particular vision. Therefore, migration processes are better understood in terms of trans-border migrations occurring across cultural, ethnic and language boundaries separating civilizational 'macro-regions' (Panarin 2016: 7-15).

The most significant divide in Soviet times has been that between the urban and rural population: city's newcomers or *priezhye* are perceived as immigrants irrespective of origin. Also, cultural boundaries are not static and the state plays an active role in reshaping them.

The current ideological rift between Russia and Ukraine may soon transform what were once seen as Slavic brothers into *chyuzhaki* or ‘alien others’ (Mukomel 2014: 3).

These conceptualizations unearth the potentials for mobility offered by the common post-Soviet space but also the variable cultural and political barriers faced by different groups of newcomers. The following sections will show how these ideas shape Russia’s social and political responses to migration.

Central Asian migrants in Russia: from *Migrantophobia* to integration?

Russian scholarship has devoted much attention to labour migration from Central Asia. Empirical research in the volumes here reviewed focuses mainly on this group of migrants. Workers from this area now contribute approximately 70% of total migration inflows, significantly altering the ethnic composition of large cities like Moscow. Their perceived ‘cultural distance’ makes them the primary target for formal and informal discrimination by authorities, employers and ordinary citizens (Mukomel 2014). Debates have centred on explaining the causes of such hostility, countering its assumptions and offering possible solutions.

The idea that migrants steal local jobs and represent a cultural or security threat to host societies is not exclusive to Russia. Russian scholars, however, are alarmed at finding that these ‘myths’ are shared by almost half the general population (Malakhov 2015: 231) and the political elite (Abashin in Mukomel 2014). Academics blame the absence of liberal values (Malakhov 2015: 230-231) and political campaigns disseminated by mass media (Poletayev in Mukomel 2014) for the wide acceptance of such beliefs. Hostility towards migrants, or *migrantophobia*, plays a fundamental ideological role: migrants represent a scapegoat around which to unify a nation in desperate need of ‘consolidation’. (Mukomel 2014: 3). Its targets include *gastarbaitery*, non-Slavic groups, Muslims and cultural ‘others’. This also means that Russian *migrantophobia* is still a very blurred phenomenon, thus calling into question explanations based on ‘cultural distance’. The absence of ethnic or religious ‘ghetto’ in Russian cities partly supports this argument (Varshaver and Rocheva in Panarin 2016).

A more significant barrier to integration can be found in that migrants often work in the informal economy. Despite gaining legal entry, they are more likely to be found in manual jobs with non-standard schedules, lower pay and harsher working conditions in the retail, logistics, construction and care sectors (Grigorieva and Mukomel in Mukomel 2014). A job rotation system built on the three-month visa-weaving scheme further delays career progression or plans for re-settlement. Their copying strategies rely mainly on informal networks as well as on living and working transnationally (Olimova in Mukomel 2014: 138-161). Changes in migrants’ behaviour, nonetheless, bear testimony to their gradual integration into Russian society (Poletayev in Panarin 2016).

In order to challenge anti-migrant positions, scholarly arguments have focused on the economics of migration. Demographic studies assume that the Russian population is set for long term decline and predict increasing migration flows from Central Asia (Vorobiova in Vorobiova and Topilin 2014: 149-154). These newcomers, unlike their predecessors, are young, less educated, with poor command of the Russian language. This has for the first time opened discussions about active integration policies.

Russian migration and integration policies: a portrait in shadow

The general consensus in academic literature is that Russian migration policies are contradictory, distorted by informality and woefully inadequate for the country's future needs. Legally, migration across the FSU begins in early 2000s when Soviet passports are finally phased out. Since then, FSU immigrants to Russia are subjected to a three-month visa-waiving scheme which de facto favours short-term labour migration over re-settlement. From 2006, concerns about demographic decline and widespread illegality have led to simplifications of both registration and naturalisation procedures. However, the 2010 'return of compatriots' programme was mainly directed at those who identify themselves as 'Russians' living abroad, while other nationalities have still to undergo a selective process aimed at attracting 'the best and the brightest' (Leonova in Vorobiova and Topilin 2014: 94-96). These policies have been marred by uncertainty about national identity as well as by discretionary implementation depending on Russia's relations with each FSU state. The overarching problem lies at strategic level in the disconnection between hegemonic nationalism inspiring restrictive policies and the reality of mass migration, fostered by economic development, which instead demands integration.

Integration policies' most notable characteristic has been their absence. In lieu of these, the state has allowed for discriminatory practices and social insecurity to proliferate. The outcomes are inter-ethnic and social tensions, at home, and poor neighbourhood relations abroad. Failure to realize that Russia has become a country of immigration represents the greatest stumbling block to the introduction of integration policies (Malakhov 2015: 11).

Disappointment with home policy-making has led migration scholars to look abroad for relevant approaches. Malakhov's recommendations for the 'successful integration of migrants' in Russia represent a good example in case. His plan includes interventions aimed respectively at formalizing employment relations, guaranteeing human rights by enforcing the rule of law, simplifying access to citizenship, adapting state education to the needs of migrant families, making Russian language learning widely accessible and finally promoting 'the formation of a climate of tolerance' (Malakhov 2015: 235-239). This catalogue of absences not only captures the distance between Western models and Russian context but also a second disconnection, namely between academics' own aspirations and the real forces at work in Russian society.

Conclusions

Russia's migration debates have focused on the emergence of an FSU regional migration system perceived as a separate entity. Academic research on FSU migration processes delivers a disturbing picture. Migrants in Russia face an increasingly hostile environment and multiple forms of discrimination. State institutions tolerate mass migration but show little commitment to integration. Multiple dialogues with soviet legacies, Western approaches and FSU economic and political processes engender different perspectives. Some scholars see current attitudes as the product of political opportunism while others highlight the historical uniqueness of the post-soviet space. The consensus is that debates should address 'real' problems based on the assumption that migrants are here to stay and integration is needed as Soviet common heritage fades away. Such commitment translates into top-down approaches founded on idealised versions of Western models.

The lack of attention to migrants' agency partly accounts for such detached approaches. Empirical research involving migrants is available but they are mostly seen as victims of exploitative relationships. This is not surprising considering that in Russia social dialogue is highly ritualised and autonomous social action hardly tolerated. Migrants' pursuit of their

interests is often individualised, fragmentary and informal. More generally, social sciences still struggle to make sense of the post-socialist transformation and steer clear of the chaotic world of work. Yet, most migrants understand themselves as being *na zarobotkah* or 'away to make a living' and are addressed, often disparagingly, as *gastarbaitery*, disposable migrant workers. Labour mobility grew exponentially in Soviet times as the working class increased in status and bargaining power but was denied any means of collective expression. It has become the main coping strategy for FSU nationals facing post-1991 territorial disintegration and neoliberal restructuring. Ignoring the antagonistic character of migration not only obscures possible explanations but precludes any emancipatory approach to its problems.

Gender perspectives remain underdeveloped because migration appears dominated by male temporary workers, but also owing to the marginality of gender approaches in male-dominated academic and political circles. Other gaps include and the absence of research on 'ethnic' businesses, student and highly-skilled migrations. These areas represent therefore fruitful grounds for future research. Notably, Russian scholars have *not* elected ethnicity as their primary tool for analysis. This might be a legacy of Soviet cosmopolitanism which has so far resisted virulent state-sponsored nationalisms; an example worthy of consideration by scholars elsewhere vis-à-vis ethnicity-centred migration studies.