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On labor migration to Russia: Central Asian migrants and migrant families in the matrix of Russia's bordering policies

Elena Nikiforova*, Olga Brednikova

Centre for Independent Social Research, Postal Box 193, 191040, St. Petersburg, Russia

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ABSTRACT

Russia is a relatively recent addition to the list of the world's top destination countries for migrants. Following the collapse of the Soviet Union, Russia has seen a number of re-configurations of its relationships with the other former USSR republics. These dynamic de- and rebordering processes have been shaped by Russia's policy-making in the field of migration, as well as changes in the character of migration itself, particularly from Central Asia. In this article, we explore the ways in which migrants from Central Asia are impacted by and negotiate this changing situation. The view of Russian society and the state of these migrants primarily as 'homo laborans'—working subjects—is not only erroneous, but creates a particular imaginary for policy-making which denies certain migrants the right to family life, often forcing family members and children to become undocumented and denying them access to state support and protection.

Introduction: unveiling family migration to Russia as a problem

In October 2015, Russian media literally exploded with news of the tragic death of a five-month-old infant, Umarali Nazarov. The tragedy happened in Saint Petersburg in a family of migrants from Tajikistan. During a raid on squatted houses where migrants from Central Asia often stay, the Russian Federal Migration Service detained several people for a lack of valid documents authorizing their stay in the territory of the Russian Federation. Among these people was Zarina Iunusova. Together with other detainees Zarina, with an infant in her arms, was brought to the local police station and detained for 5 h until the circumstances were clarified. The baby was taken to one of the children's hospitals of Saint Petersburg. The next day, when the parents finally received information on their baby's whereabouts, they went to the children's hospital where they were notified that the infant had died in the night.

The incident triggered a wave of indignation. Liberal newspapers published articles on human rights, accusing the authorities of implementing a flawed, brutal immigration policy. Pro-patriotic media used this as another opportunity to say, "Oh those bloody foreigners!" and shift the blame onto the family. Besides the press, the debate hit the social networks and blogs and partially spilled out beyond the virtual world: representatives of the Tajik diaspora gathered to protest in front of the Honorary Consulate of Tajikistan in Saint Petersburg; a small rally urging an investigation into the crime took place. However, after a month, the story slowly faded from the public eye. The mother of the baby, who was staying in Russia illegally, was deported. The body of the infant was transported home to Tajikistan, where it was quietly buried without the further investigation promised by the government of Tajikistan.

Having caused reverberations across Russian society, this tragic event also raised new political and academic questions with regards to family migration to Russia. There had previously been studies of family migration that covered issues of female labor migration (Agadzhanian & Zotova, 2011; Brednikova & Tkach, 2010; Kasymova, 2012; Khushkadamova, 2010; Tiuriukanova, 2011; Zotova, 2007) and children from migrant families (Aleksandrov, Baranova, & Ivaniushina, 2012; Brednikova & Sabirova, 2015; Florinskaia, 2012a, 2012b). However, these studies explored people residing legally in Russian territory facing problems of adaptation and integration. The case of Umarali Nazarov's family highlighted another facet of family migration to Russia: the existence of a boundary between working and non-working family members, and the structural exclusion of the latter from the state's purview and therefore from Russia's legal and social space.

Exclusion is one the central problems in academic and public debates on migration (see, for example, Agamben, 2004; Mbembe, 2003; De Genova, 2015). Considering the case of migrants from Central Asia in Russian cities, Round and Kuznetsova write of 'a citywide state of exception, within which legal frameworks protecting migrants are ignored or misinterpreted to the benefit of the market' (2016, p. 1). In accord with their elaboration, we focus on yet one more aspect of migrants' state of exception that is characteristic of contemporary Russia:

* Corresponding author.
E-mail addresses: elenik@cisr.ru (E. Nikiforova), bred8@yandex.ru (O. Brednikova).

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the conceptual and structural deprivation of migrants, labelled as unskilled laborers, who are deprived of the right to any life in Russia outside of work. Here, we refer to a set of problems that emerge out of the discrepancy between the Russian state's views and the actual life experiences of Central Asian migrants. State policy sees these migrants as cheap labor; a work force coming to Russia to stay temporarily, make some money, and go home. The reality, however, is rather different. As ours and our colleagues' research shows, what start as short-term visits often last for years, with the temporary work stay of a solo migrant gradually (or suddenly) becoming a family project. In regards to citizens from Central Asia coming to Russia for work, the Russian state, however, is not willing to talk the language of family. It is the logic of the labor market which predefines this migration stream, and therefore in order to stay legally in the long term, anyone coming to Russia within this stream is obliged to be officially employed—a condition which is often not possible for all members of a migrant family.

Russia has only recently become one of the largest migrant-receiving countries and is still adapting to this new role. The first part of our article analyses the series of geopolitical and social borderings and reborderings in the course of which Russia has been established as destination country for migrants. However, the main focus of our article is on the lives of migrants themselves. Inspired by the feminist geopolitics that refocuses the gaze 'from the macrosecurity of states to the microsecurity of people and their homes; from the disembodied space of neorealist geopolitics to a field of live human subjects with names, families, and hometowns' (Hyndman, 2007, p. 36), in the main body of the article we consider the effects of Russian state bordering on the life of a labor migrant from Central Asia, giving special attention to family migration as a growing phenomenon overlooked by the state. We consider the quest for legalization of a working migrant as it played out in a highly unstable legal environment, and move to discussing the problems experienced by families in migration.

Methodological note

This article originates from our work on two large research projects (see Acknowledgements). In the course of these projects, we analyzed secondary data (articles, documents) on the legal environment shaping migration in Russia. The main sources of primary data were expert and biographical interviews/conversations and observations. We conducted twenty interviews with employees of migration services, social services, and human rights organizations dealing with migrants. The main pool of firsthand information revealing the migrants' position is composed of biographical interviews (about 60) with migrants from Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, and Uzbekistan—the main suppliers of the migrant workforce to modern Russia. Our informants were men and women aged 18 to 50 who had migrated with their families or by themselves and had spent between one and ten years in the state of migration. In the interviews, we discussed the everyday lives of migrants and the problems they encountered during migration. Having developed a special relationship of trust with a number of migrants (15 in total from Tajikistan, Kyrgyzstan, and Uzbekistan), we followed their lives for two years. In terms of methodological perspectives in migration research, we position our work within the domain of transnationalism with its focus on migrant subjectivities formed by multiple attachments that stretch across national borders and contexts. This article focuses on migrants' experiences in Russia and with Russian bordering policies and practices, leaving aside the policies of sending societies as well as the challenges of living transnational lives. However, we realize the crucial importance of these processes for shaping a migrant's life and have explored them in depth elsewhere (Brednikova, 2017).

Conceptualization: bordering as applied to migration

Bordering and migration

Over the past two decades, the understanding of borders in the social sciences has gone through significant changes and developments (see, for example, Johnson et al., 2011; Newman & Paasi, 1998). Up to the end of the 1980s, borders were viewed mainly as pre-given intact constructions, defining discrete entities, and any debate about borders that did take place focused solely on state borders. However, in the last twenty years this perspective has been challenged by a view of borders as dynamic processes, with the field of analysis expanding to include manifold territorial and social borders at various scales. The research agenda in the social sciences has, as a result, shifted from the border as a stable entity to the policies and practices of social and spatial differentiation, looking at the processes through which borders are made, remade, and unmade (see Brambilla et al., 2015; Johnson et al., 2011; Megoran, 2012). This methodological and epistemological shift was an academic response to the rise of new mobilities: the growing mobility of people and information, intertwined in a complex cause-and-effect relationship with the mobility of borders themselves. In recent decades, along with a series of political reborderings in Europe that resulted in the relocation of state borders in space, all over the world borders have been demonstrating mobility of a different kind, stretching from state border perimeters to inner territories of states and dissipating in society through the activities of police, migration services, and other institutions (Balibar, 2003; Bauder, 2011). With growing securitization of domestic and international politics and the establishment of 'the migration-security nexus' (Faist, 2005), 'migrants and migratory life in general' (Nail, 2012, p. 242) have become the ultimate target of border enforcement, making earlier predictions of a 'borderless world' even more conditional. The tendency of states to reinforce border thinking-and-acting as a mode of governance and as a part of everyday life (Jones & Johnson, 2014; Perkins & Rumford, 2013; Yuval-Davis, Wemyss, & Cassidy, 2017) has evoked considerable reaction—and resistance—from scholars worldwide. The most radical proposals call for revising the global world system, advancing the possibility of open and no borders (Bauder, 2014a), as well as demanding equality and inclusion in political projects of belonging (Yuval-Davis, 2012) and a universal 'right to the world' irrespective of immigration status (Nevins, 2017). This radical criticism elaborating alternative visions to today's increasingly bordered world is articulated by scholars analysing the mechanisms and manifestations of state bordering as it shapes mobility and migration. Still the primary units of world division, nation-states set their own mobility rules, creating categories of migrants, allowing some people in, and rejecting others (Bauder, 2014a, 2014b; Neumayer, 2006). Among the grounds for such 'differential inclusion' (Mezzadra & Neison, 2011, 2013), nationality is the most obvious and essential one. As Neumayer emphasizes, today's 'supposedly unprecedented mobility' remains strictly (b)ordered by international visa regimes implemented for passport holders, which creates highly unequal access to foreign spaces for different categories of people and reinforces existing inequalities (2006, pp. 5–6). Overall, international migration policies demonstrate a wide spectrum of possible criteria for selecting incoming persons, based on citizenship policy in a given country, economic rationality, and/or emotional attitudes towards 'the Other'. Post-World War II migration policies have involved a variety of approaches toward potential migrants: ranking people by the principle of 'cultural proximity' (Riaño & Wastl-Walter, 2006), by common ethnic origin and the *jus sanguinis* inclusion principle, or by personal qualifications such as education, professional experience, age, language knowledge, and professional adaptability (Bauder, Lenard, & Straehle, 2014).

The contemporary border debate looks at borders as dynamic systems subject to constant change. Thus, borders as systems of inequalities producing the ranks of inclusion/exclusion are highly unstable and dynamic, being direct derivatives of states' shifting internal and foreign