3. The Political Context of Migration in the Former Soviet Union

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By 1987, following the outbreak of the first major ethno-political conflict in Nagorno-Karabakh, there were several variants of regional/ethnic conflicts brewing within the Soviet Union. First, there were regional conflicts of significant duration (lasting no less than several months) that involved the deployment of regular military units. Such cases included the crises in Nagorno-Karabakh, Abkhazia, Tadjikistan, South-Ossetia, Trans-Dniester, and Chechnya. Second, there were approximately 20 short-term (lasting only a few days) armed conflicts which claimed mostly civilian casualties. The most notable conflicts of this type erupted in Fergana, Osh, Ingushetia, Baku, and Sumgait. Finally, there were more than 100 non-military conflicts that transcended territorial, ethnic, and clan boundaries. Most of these conflicts were concentrated in Central Asia, the Caucasus, and the North Caucasus region of Russia.

All three types of conflict directly affected the course of migration in the post-Soviet space. Given that ten million people currently reside in zones of potential conflict, there is a compelling reason to pay close attention to socio-political circumstances in the countries of the FSU and the implications that each holds for the patterns of migration and future political conflict in the region. Are the states that now provide shelter for refugees more stable than those from which the migrants originated? Is it possible to distinguish these intense waves of migration from those generated by economic and other factors? What are the consequences of these intense waves of migration for those countries that offer asylum, and for those countries that are being abandoned? Such issues form the basis of this chapter.

While all of the newly independent states face the dilemmas of transition, it is possible to sub-divide them into specific groups. Typically, analysts separate them into two groups—those states that provide asylum to refugees and forced resettlers, and those states that produce refugees and coerce resettlement. This categorization is extremely crude and imprecise, as often the very same states (or

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administrative districts) that provide asylum to some national groups simultaneously pursue discriminatory policy toward others. With this caveat in mind, it is possible to sub-divide the states of the FSU into three groups according to the extent to which national policies either “push” or “pull” migrants, and the degree to which governing structures retain the capacity to resist the temptation to play the “nationality card” for political legitimacy purposes.

The first category consists of states that are politically immature, combining precarious democratic structures with authoritarian tendencies. Members of this group include Russia, Ukraine, and Belarus, Moldova, and Armenia. In each case, the institutions of civil society are extremely weak, and parliaments have become closed political corporations pitted directly against executive branches governed by presidential authority. Because of the instability inherent in nascent political institutions, governance is marred by authoritarian tendencies, characterized by a strengthening of state control over the transmission of societal interests (including control over the mass media, the legislative branch, and private entrepreneurship), and the suppression the autonomous and federalist proclivities of regional and ethnic minorities. This tendency has led to the escalation of a series of violent ethno-political conflicts, such as those in trans-Dniester, Crimea, Ossetia-Ingushetia, and Chechnya. The political instability resulting from inchoate democratic mechanisms also gives rise to ethnophobia that fuels political and ethnic conflicts. Nevertheless, each of these states provide political havens for refugees. Thus, the absence of refugees and emigrants from each of these states suggest the existence of an inverse relationship between the levels of political stability and migration in the FSU.¹

Russia provides a vivid example of the link between political stability and migration in this first group of states of the FSU. Although there has been a significant influx of refugees and forced re-settlers to its territory from other countries of the FSU, there are virtually no comparable flows of emigration. The only exceptions have been the several thousand Chechens that have sought shelter with relatives in Ukraine and Kazakhstan following the escalation of the war in and around Grozny.

A similar correlation between political stability and migration can be discerned for the other states included in this first group. Belarus, for example, accepted

¹ After the Chechen crisis, which caused huge migratory flows in the North Caucasus (about 320,000 people) this thesis looks extremely doubtful at first glance. However, it should be noted that the majority of migrants have already returned to their places of residence in the territory of the Chechen Republic. According to the data of the Federal Migratory Service, about 5,000 people are arriving daily.
more than 30,000 residents that were in search of political asylum from Latvia, Lithuania, Georgia and Tadjikistan. Moreover, it should be noted that there have been no observable patterns of large-scale emigration of non-titular minorities from Belarus. Similarly, Ukraine has tended to provide shelter for refugees from the trans-Dniester conflict, accepting more than 50,000 people in 1992. As of 1996, practically all of those refugees left Ukraine and returned to their former places of residence. The most significant migration problem for Ukraine, however, remains the repatriation of Crimean Tatars and representatives of other repressed nations of the Soviet period that previously resided within Ukraine’s present borders (such as Greeks and Germans).

A similar situation transpired in Moldova. Following the escalation of the trans-Dniester conflict in the summer of 1992 (prompting the exodus of about 100,000 people), the socio-political situation in Moldova began to stabilize, allowing for the majority of refugees and migrants to return to their places of residence. Presently, Moldova serves as a political haven for displaced Moldovan communities spread across the FSU.

Armenia, which today enjoys a relatively stable political environment for its multi-ethnic communities, also serves as a lure for emigration. Despite the prolonged conflict with Azerbaijan, the domestic situation has stabilized largely as a result of the role played by the Armenian diaspora. The indigenous financial and cultural centers, developed by the traditional socialist (“Dashnaksutyun”) and liberal-democratic parties in Armenia during the previous century and preserved by the Armenia diaspora throughout the Soviet period, were re-established and institutionalized in the 1980s. Although Armenia experienced an outflow of forced re-settlers (more than 200,000 Azerbaijanis left the republic in 1988-1989), the nation-state was able to absorb more than 300,000 Armenian refugees, mainly from Azerbaijan. Recently, under conditions of economic austerity (precipitated by the economic blockade imposed by Azerbaijan and Turkey), Armenia has “produced” a net outflow of non-titular minorities (undoubtedly this outflow may be assumed to consist of economic migrants) to Russia and countries outside of the post-Soviet space. Given the stabilization of the national economy and the dissipation of the crisis in the Nagorno- Karabakh region, the migration situation has begun to improve.

The second category of states of the FSU consists of “quasi-stable regimes” that are governed by “educated autocrats.” Members of this group include the states of Central Asia (excluding Tajikistan). The absolute power of the leaders of these

\[\text{2 Minister of Foreign Affairs of Kazakhstan, Kassymzhymart Tokaev, adheres to this opinion with regard to the state system of his country, Interfax, May 13, 1995.}\]
states (especially in Turkmenistan), transforms nominally democratic institutions (parliament, parties, local management authorities, courts) into mere cosmetic appendages of authoritarian rule. These regimes lack popular legitimacy and ruthlessly suppress the remaining vestiges of political dissent (such as in Uzbekistan and Turkmenistan). For each regime, the facade of stability masks the fact that internal conflicts continue to fester along ethnic and clan lines. Lacking popular appeal, each regime derives its legitimacy via control mechanisms and appeals to pan-Islamism that, in turn, alienate non-titular nationality groups. Thus, all of the states in this second category are “producers” of migration.  

In Russia alone, the Federal Migration Service registered approximately 380,000 refugees and forced migrants from Uzbekistan, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan and Turkmenistan. Roughly 70 percent of these were ethnic Russians who were forced to vacate in search of political asylum.

The third category of states includes Azerbaijan, Georgia, and Tadjikistan. These states are governed by similar political systems that were formed under conditions of duress and civil war. In each case, existing regimes came to power via a coup d’etat that concentrated power to various degrees in the hands of authoritarian leaders and governing coalitions. In Tajikstan, for example, all forms of opposition have been subjected to ruthless persecution, while basic elements of democratic governance (such as opposition parties and an independent press) have been preserved in Georgia and Azerbaijan, despite the domestic political chaos and authoritarian tendencies generated by multiple ethnic conflicts.

The states that comprise this third category are the primary “producers” of forced migration in the FSU. As of 1996, these states “produced” over 700,000 refugees throughout the FSU.

The Ethno-Political Factor in Russian Migration in the FSU

Political and socio-economic factors are not the only motivations for increased migratory activity in the FSU. These factors alone cannot fully explain the character, structure and intensity of existing migration patterns in the post-Soviet space. For example, if viewed solely from the perspectives of the level of socio-

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3 Lack of records and registration data regarding refugees and forced migrants in the above-mentioned states does not allow us to evaluate the number of forced migrants arriving from the conflict areas of that region, primarily from Tajikstan, and also as the result of bloody events in Osh and Fergana (evidently, the number of forced migrants in these states amounts to tens of thousands of people). The only exception is the registration in Kirgizstan of about 13,000 refugees from Tadjikistan.
political tension and governmental capacities, Kyrgyzstan would be expected to be more stable and democratic than Belarus under President Alexander Lukashenko. Nevertheless, more Russian citizens have left Kyrgyzstan than Belarus. A much more intensive exodus of Russians is observed from relatively well-off Uzbekistan than from Ukraine which is in the throes of the most severe economic crisis in the region.

An understanding of the relationship between political stability and migration requires analysis of “ethnic distance,” i.e., the cultural differences between the representatives of different ethnic groups that limit capacities for mutual adaptation. Using statistical information from 1959-1989, a scale was developed to determine the sensitivity of regional conditions for adaptation of Russian minorities. Research revealed that the smaller the ethnic distance between Russians and titular majority populations, the lower the incidence of Russian emigration from the “near abroad.”

In practice, Russians are assimilating in Ukraine and Belarus more easily than ever before. In those states, the incidence of inter-marriages between Russian minorities and the titular majority roughly equals the intra-national rate of marriage for each group. Moreover, Russians, Ukrainians, and Belarusians easily understand each other’s language, and the exodus of Russians from these republics is lower than the influx of people from Russia (but it is too early to generalize and say that Russians “run away” from the eastern Slavonian republics). The fact that Russians adapt better under culturally similar circumstances, however, is not surprising. As a caveat, however, it should be noted that evidence of hostility between Serbs and Croatians in Yugoslavia illustrates that historical/cultural assimilation does not necessarily breed mutual tolerance. Often, contempt among culturally related peoples persists in the face of political disputes and conflicting territorial claims. Neither of these circumstances, however, undermine the ethno-cultural propinquity of Russians and Belarusians. Similarly, Russian-Ukrainian relations, although complicated by tensions over the Crimea and the Black Sea fleet, remain overwhelmingly harmonious.

Evidence from the Baltic states, Georgia, Armenia, and Moldova point to a slightly different correlation between ethnic migration and cultural assimilation of Russian minority groups. Despite the rhetoric of discrimination espoused by

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extremists among titular majorities and the xenophobic propaganda disseminated by their Russian counterparts, there has been an overwhelming display of cultural tolerance between Russians residing in the near abroad and the respective titular leaderships. Research by the All-Union Central Institute of Research of Public Opinion and Relations reveals, for example, that only a small stratum of the Russian minority community in the Baltic states has been subjected to intense psychological pressure. These Russians are distinguished by their relatively short length of residence in the region, their inability to speak the national language, and their segregation from the local population. Included in this group are those former employees of federal police agencies, representatives of former Soviet administrative and communist party structures, and Russian military servicemen. At the same time, however, it should be noted that formal discrimination, reinforced by language and citizenship laws in Latvia and Estonia, noticeably reduced the prospects for Russian assimilation in these states.

In Georgia and Armenia, the Russian minority communities have always been smaller in size compared to the other former Soviet republics. Almost half of the Russians residing in each of these states were born in the republic, and roughly one-quarter have some native blood. Until recently, Russian-Armenian and Russian-Georgian relations were never a source of tension, with the percentages of Russian-Armenian inter-marriages second only to the rate of intra-Slav marriages. This process of assimilation, however, has been stunted by the recent outbreak of ethnic conflicts in these states.

The territories of the Caspian-Aral region—including Azerbaijan, Chechnya, Dagestan and the republics of Central Asia—have exhibited a peculiar set of conditions that have provided exceptions to this general trend of Russian assimilation in this second category of states. In fact, 80 percent of all Russians returning to the Russian Federation come from these regions. This sharp increase has been directly associated with the explosion of inter-national and civil conflicts in the North Caucasus region. Yet these trends have been in place since the end of the 1970s, suggesting that current migration patterns are more deeply rooted than is typically recognized.

Major obstacles to the acculturation of Russians in the newly independent states include not only the perception of “ethnic distance,” but also the radical

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nationalistic platforms endorsed by prominent local officials. In general, many titular majorities in the newly independent states continue to see themselves as second-class citizens in their native lands, as was the case throughout the Soviet era. As a result, there has been a strong tendency exhibited by newly empowered local elites to enact reactionary laws designed to thwart a perceived Russian crusade to restore political control via national “fifth columns” in the region.

It would be wrong to attribute the mass exodus of Russians from the newly independent states solely to discrimination. The fact that a massive departure of European populations from Central Asia began at the end of the 1970s suggests a correlation between the processes of migration and changes in the ethno-social structure of the new states in the region. At that time, the percentages of titular peoples with higher education equaled those of the Russian minorities, enabling them to compete favorably against Russians for prestigious management positions within the local industries. An additional push was provided by a special ethnic policy of Soviet leaders regarding state management—the policy of “titularization” that conferred preferential treatment to representatives of native populations.

This factor became even more important following the dissolution of the USSR, when indigenous political elites were no longer restricted from occupying senior posts within national governing structures. Vested with new sovereignty, officials became free to nationalize senior positions and oust non-titular state administrators in the name of equality and national unity.

This issue has been closely connected to the promulgation of new language laws throughout the FSU. The inability to speak the local language has now become justification for the replacement of Russian professionals from power structures and administrative posts in emerging state economic sectors. Deadlines were introduced in almost every country for the transition to national vernacular in the conduct of all official business. All state officials were supposed to have mastered the national language by these deadlines. Pressure in this area has recently relaxed, however, with the Russian language receiving official status in Kazakhstan, Uzbekistan and Kyrgyzstan.

The problem of official state languages is very closely related to the lack of access for Russian-speaking peoples to higher education, and, as a result, to more prestigious occupations. This process did not begin in 1991. In fact, for the past several decades there has been distinct favoritism regarding primary school and university admissions extended towards the titular majorities in Central Asia and the Trans-Caucasus. Since independence, however, education in the Russian
language has become a critical issue at the secondary level. There has been a proclivity to reduce the number of hours for Russian language instruction. Moreover, the quality of teaching within Russian communities has precipitously declined, owing to the lack of funding for Russian schools (though national schools also need more financing), shortage of Russian textbooks, and declining pool of qualified Russian teachers.8

These conditions have been complicated by the breakdown of the communications network throughout the FSU. Russian-speaking mass media are virtually inaccessible to citizens residing in the southern regions of the FSU. Russian publications have declined dramatically, and it is now very difficult to subscribe to most of the central Russian newspapers. Moreover, the time allocated for Russian programming on television and radio stations has been radically reduced. It is extremely difficult to maintain contacts with relatives in Russia, as rising transportation fares have made local visits prohibitively expensive.

The collapse of economic ties between the republics of the former USSR has also devastated national production and employment rates throughout the FSU. With the collapse of local industries (especially national military industrial complexes) there is no longer a demand for industrial workers. This has hit hardest the standard of living of the local Russian minorities that at one time provided the backbone for republican industries. Ironically, this disproportionate burden borne by the Russian minorities has tempered anti-Russian sentiments in the near abroad, as Russians are no longer seen as monopolizing privileged positions at the expense of the titular majority.

The Political Consequences of Migration

It is extremely difficult to reach decisive conclusions regarding a causal relationship between political instability and migration trends in the FSU. Professional analysts confront grave difficulties in distinguishing cases of forced migrations from those prompted by socio-economic conditions. This is especially true regarding analysis that applies rigid formal criteria. The potential for the spontaneous explosion of ethnic conflict, as evidenced in Tadjikistan, Azerbaijan, and Abkhazia, has placed Russian minorities residing in the near abroad in a constant state of anxiety. This state of perpetual insecurity explains the lasting

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8 There are virtually no schools for training Russian teachers in the near abroad, and the former Soviet distribution system is no longer operational.
flow of Russian emigration in several regions, such as in Uzbekistan and Kyrgyzstan, even in the absence of overt hostilities.

The poor economic conditions in the non-Russian former Soviet republics have only exacerbated the rate of Russian emigration from the near abroad. It should be noted that the volume of migration has been higher from those countries where Russian (or European) populations have lived for a relatively short period of time. A certain percentage of the Russian population of the countries of Central Asia and the Trans-Caucasus consist of officials and managers, military servicemen, scientists and intellectuals, and workers who were immediately assigned to positions in the region upon graduation from high school. The majority of those were workers from industrial enterprises that were created after the war as the result of the communist doctrine of leveling the economic factors in different areas of the Soviet Union. The prevailing preference for autarkic economic development predisposed Soviet leaders to divert significant funds to create regional industrial bases (especially in Central Asia) that artificially privileged the rural economy in certain republics (such as in Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, Turkmenistan, and Uzbekistan), and doomed resource-rich republics to lower standards of living than those dominated by heavy industry. Soviet central planners failed to take into account that local populations might not be willing to fill industrial vacancies, and that they might not possess the requisite technical skills or work ethic to develop infant industries. In consequence, professionals trained in the European regions of the USSR were invited to work in these giant industrial complexes, further increasing the tendency of natives to remain in rural communities.

Today the most qualified professionals in industry, science, medicine, education, and other spheres of the economy have relocated from those unstable countries. As a rule, the first wave of emigrants were the most qualified, wealthy (relocation requires significant funds) and active members of the population. Preparation for their replacement requires time and comes at great expense.

For the countries of Central Asia and the Trans-Caucasus, the primary objective is to stem the degradation afflicting all sectors of indigenous industry. National industrial decline has tended to isolate some eastern countries of the former USSR from the rest of the world, turning the countries into remote rural provincial areas (economic and political), and forcing them to become inward-oriented. This, in turn, has encouraged local elites to resort to traditionalism, political extremism, and jingoism in order to shore up domestic political support. These diversionary tactics, however, have not only fanned the flames of
nationalism and undermined domestic political stability, but accelerated the pace of Russian migration throughout the FSU.\footnote{See also, A.A. Ignatenko, “Whether There is a Threat of Islamic Fundamentalism to Post-Soviet Central Asia, in International Relations in Russia and the NIS,” Moscow: Carnegie Center, 1995.}

In Russia, forced migrants have been relocated primarily in the North Caucasus and the Volga regions (the most conflicted regions), as well as in the Urals and the Central and Central-Chernozem regions. Last year these regions absorbed approximately 80 percent of all the Russian refugees and forced migrants. All of these territories, however, are also highly coveted by internal migrants from the northern and eastern regions of Russia. Thus, there has been competition among forced migrants from the near abroad and those internal migrants in pursuit of greater economic and social welfare. In this regard, a complex and explosive socio-psychological situation is developing around the mass influx of internal and external Russian refugees. This has been exacerbated by the political manipulation of the refugee issue by ambitious political parties that have been vying for greater representation of the Russian electorate. In fact, the political sympathies of those who have relocated to Russia lie with those politicians that promise to redress their political and economic status, even at the expense of reinstating the pre-\textit{perestroika} status quo. Such rhetoric, for example, resonated in the Communist and nationalist political platforms that attracted the highest percentages of votes among forced Russian migrants.\footnote{“Russians in the New Foreign Lands: Central Asia, Ethno-social Essay,” Institute of Ethnology and Anthropology of the Russian Academy of Sciences, 1993, pp. 83-84.} This was underscored most vividly by the overwhelming pro-communist vote registered by Russian minorities residing in Estonia during the 1996 presidential elections.\footnote{Information Agency, \textit{Interfax}, Presidential Vestnik, May 17, 1996.}

\textbf{Conclusion}

In conclusion, under certain circumstances, refugees play an especially destabilizing role in the socio-political life of those states that provide them with shelter. In Baku, for example, refugees incited riots in 1990, and in Dushanbe, during the same year, they became victims of rumors suggesting that they provided sanctuaries to Armenian refugees.\footnote{Chronicle of Major Political Events in the Countries of the Former USSR is taken from the Monthly Information Analytical Essay, “Social-Political Situation in the Post Soviet World,” in 1992.} Unfortunately, the major problems caused by mass forced migrations will persist in the newly independent states throughout the end of the century. Most migrations will occur in areas of either continuing or potential armed conflict. This will form a southern “arc of tension” that will encompass Tadjikistan, Azerbaijan, Georgia,
the North Caucasus and Crimea, and the trans-Dniester region. The ongoing
danger of new conflicts in the “arch of instability” will provoke emigration of not
only Russians, but also of titular populations from the regions actually embroiled
in armed conflict (Tadjikistan, Georgia, and Azerbaijan), and from the
neighboring regions that remain on the verge of war.

Intensive migration patterns will persist in Central Asia. The exodus of Russian
(or Russian-speaking) populations will continue unabated in this region, due to
the worsening economic conditions and increasing ethnic distance between
titular majority and Russian minority groups. These patterns will be marginally
controlled by the stabilization of local economies and reversal of discriminatory
nationalities policies.

A special situation will probably develop in the Russian region of North
Kazakhstan (and in some autonomous republics within the Russian Federation).
In these regions, migratory patterns will be directly determined by economic
factors. In sum, the ebb and flow of populations from other regions will be
defined by the progress of local industrial sectors, regardless of the ethnic origin
of the migrant populations.