

“WIDESPREAD DISCONTENT IN RUSSIA IS INEVITABLE AND MAY WELL LEAD TO FURTHER RESENTMENT TOWARDS GROUPS OF CAUCASIAN ORIGIN”

Interview with Katerina Strani*
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Conducted by Jesse Tatum, Interview Editor of CRIA

CRIA: *How currently attractive is Russia for job seekers/migrant workers from the Caucasus (and other ex-Soviet republics)?*

Strani: According to official statistics, Russia is the second-largest immigration country after the USA, with over 160,000 migrants annually. As the largest, most industrialized country and the most dynamic economy of all the former soviet states, Russia is certainly more attractive for job seekers from those areas, at least in principle. In Moscow, for instance, salaries can be from 5 to 15 times higher than in some CIS countries, with the exception maybe of Kazakhstan. However, it all depends on three crucial factors: firstly, the immigrant’s country of origin, secondly, the host city and thirdly, the job sought and the skills required.

The immigrant’s country of origin determines the obstacles he or she may face, both at an official administrative level, and at an unofficial everyday level. In general, job seekers from CIS countries would prefer to move to Russia mainly for economic as well as historical/cultural reasons. In 2005 alone, 95% of registered migrant workers came from the CIS. Georgia is a case in point. The arrest of Russian officers in Georgia on grounds of espionage back in 2006 had resulted in large-scale deportation of Georgians from Russia. Recent developments in South Ossetia and Abkhazia, including the August war and the recognition of these regions as independent states by Russia, exacerbated tension between Russia and Georgia. The Russian government imposed (short-lived) visa restrictions on Georgian nationals. Russia is still attractive for Georgians, as the difference in salaries is certainly not negligible; however, strained relations between the two countries inevitably have an impact on the workers’ everyday lives.

The host city is equally (if not more) significant. Moscow has always had a special status, both as a metropolis within the USSR and within the Russian Federation. Moscow’s current population is estimated at 10.5 million according to the 2002 census. Despite an overall population decline and an increase in poverty, Moscow’s population seems to be increasing due to internal migration and its economy seems to be resisting national recession. On the one hand, this makes it even more attractive for job seekers from Russia and the CIS. On the other hand, *registratsiya*, a stamp indicating a permanent address on someone’s internal

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passport, which is a measure imposed in order to monitor legal and illegal residents and population growth, constitutes a significant obstacle for job seekers, especially from the Caucasus. *Registratsiya* is costly and time consuming, and many job seekers opt for smaller towns where this measure is not in place and the movement of people is less controlled.

Lastly, Russia in principle attracts and is in need of unskilled as opposed to highly qualified workers. The overwhelming majority of immigrants from the Caucasus are working in markets, in the agricultural sector, or in retail trading. Most of the market stalls in big cities are operated by people from the Caucasus and Central Asia, who earn about ten times as much as they would in their home countries.

CRIA: What kind of visa restrictions do they face, especially compared with those of the EU, the US, and other “western” alternatives? What sort of legality issues are at play, in terms of obtaining proper work/study permits, particularly after recent legislation (April 2007) limiting foreign workers’ rights?

Strani: As mentioned above, visa restrictions were used in the past as sanctions in cases of war or deteriorating relations. The 2007 legislation barring foreign workers from most retail sectors was presented as a measure against illegal immigration and in order to place quotas on the number of foreign workers. In actual fact, most markets and street kiosks became empty within days, as they were operated mainly by Azerbaijanis and Georgians. These people did not have a choice but to leave the country, unable to work, even if they had obtained legal residency status. Limiting those workers’ rights did not result in a crackdown on illegal immigration, but in a crackdown in all immigration, particularly from Azerbaijan, Georgia, and other regions of the Caucasus.

Even before the 2007 legislation, however, obtaining the necessary documents for travel, residence and work was not an easy task for immigrants from the Caucasus. The procedure has always been costly and time-consuming, and police corruption and red tape only make matters worse. In conversations I had with two Georgian illegal immigrants in Moscow, they had stated that it was impossible for them to register in Moscow, because no one would provide them with the right papers and instructions on what procedure to follow. In the end, one of them told me that he preferred to bribe the police with 30 rubles and be left alone rather than “go through the hassle” of applying for a *registratsiya* which cost 500 rubles at the time. These are the sort of legality issues that are at play.

CRIA: In light of Russian’s shrinking population, and of poor economic situations in the Caucasus, how important will an ongoing influx of migrant labour be in the next few decades?

Strani: Russia has been suffering from a low birth rate and an ageing population for the last 10-15 years and, according to some sources, its population is decreasing by 700,000 each year. This has resulted in a shrinking working population unable to maintain economic growth. The question is whether this could be offset by an influx of foreign labour. In larger cities such as Moscow, Saint Petersburg, or Voronezh, internal migration is significant and there is a noticeable rural exodus. Rural areas are getting poorer and emptier, while big cities are getting overpopulated and richer. As a result, we have workers from the Caucasus having to compete for jobs with Russians migrating from the rural areas in big cities. So the issue of a shrinking working population is now replaced by unemployment, at least in big cities. And unemployment breeds discontent, intolerance, and xenophobic attitudes.

An effective migration policy cannot be put in place unless economic imbalances within the country are addressed. As long as Moscow grows to the detriment of smaller cities and rural areas, it will attract more foreign workers who it may not be able to support. Instead of limiting those workers' rights and kicking them out of the country, both metaphorically and in some cases literally, they must be encouraged to migrate to rural areas or areas where they are mostly needed. An ongoing influx of migrant labour is indeed important for Russia's economic growth, as long as it is directed towards areas where it can be most effective, not by force, but by means of social benefits and support.

CRIA: *Does Moscow enact sufficient measures to ensure that immigrants are smoothly integrated into society?*

Strani: In a word – no. Many immigrants from the Caucasus become disillusioned after moving to Moscow in search for a better life, and it is difficult for them to go back. Their home countries are significantly poorer and in most cases politically unstable. Those who work illegally in Moscow without a *registratsiya* often become seasonal workers, frequently returning to their home countries. Moscow Mayor Yuri Luzhkov had conducted meetings with minority representatives in the past; however, these did not seem to lead anywhere. By contrast, humanitarian organisations keep accusing him of xenophobic practices ever since he introduced the *registratsiya* system in Moscow, replacing the *propiska* (internal passport stamp denoting residence) in Soviet times, which was against the newly established constitution granting every citizen of the Russian Federation freedom of movement with its territory. I guess that one of the relics of the USSR that is still alive and well is the notion of “order over freedom.”

I remember my time in Moscow back in 2000. Because of my dark hair and eyes and skin complexion, I was almost always mistaken for Chechen, Georgian, or Azerbaijani. I was called *chiornaya* (=black) on the streets, and I was checked by the police on practically every street corner. The fact that I spoke Russian with an allegedly Georgian accent (I have no idea where I picked that up, as I'd never visited Georgia) and I held a Greek passport was very suspicious for them, and I was constantly interrogated by police on the streets. One day, I decided to speak English instead of Russian, and they left me alone, joking about Greek football. As a Greek speaking English, I was fine. When I spoke Russian, it made them suspicious that I was Caucasian with a stolen Greek passport. It was this sort of attitude and the ensuing fear that was instilled in me that prompted me to research “*Kavkazophobia*” in Moscow.

CRIA: *Do you see any potential backlash/flashpoints, e.g. ones that could be similar to the recent riots in France's ethnic quarters or the anti-Caucasian riots in Karelia (Sept. 2006)?*

Strani: At the moment, Russia is suffering from rising unemployment, an already anemic economy in recession and a problematic migration policy. Widespread discontent is inevitable and may well lead to further resentment towards groups of Caucasian origin. But then again, the same applies to all ethnic groups across Europe.

CRIA: *Finally, what are some of the key factors in the post-Soviet rise of Russian nationalist sentiment? Are immigrants treated in similar ways, for instance, in larger cities, such as Moscow, as they are in smaller urban centers or towns?*

Strani: The post-Soviet Russian psyche is troubled and confused when it comes to dealing with issues of tolerance towards other nations and ethnicities, because this was not ingrained in Soviet consciousness. Everyone was in the same boat; all were equal in the eyes of Law and State. Suspicion, rejection of anything “foreign,” and national (Soviet) pride were characteristic of that identity. Russians never had to be tolerant; they had never experienced liberal democracy before and have now reached a point where they have to adapt their political culture, largely influenced by (tsarist and Soviet) authoritarian regimes, to fit Western standards. Suddenly the world demands of them to show tolerance towards other nationalities and religions, to adopt and implement a fair and effective immigration policy; this is an immense task for them. And while ex-Soviet republics are now considered as countries of the “near abroad,” they are still regarded as foreign. And of course there is the issue of poverty and unemployment, which also gives rise to a sense of “otherness” and of “us” against “them”. When this happens, it does not matter whether the immigrant is from the Caucasus, Central Asia, or Africa; a poor immigrant has no identity. The situation seems to be better in smaller urban centers or rural areas, where it is easier for immigrants to strike deals with the local police; however, this is not absolute, and there have been cases of clashes with the local officials or with the local mafia.

What is crucial, in this case, is that tolerance may be considered both a behavioural as well as an attitudinal issue; however, intolerant behavior may not necessarily derive from essentially intolerant attitudes, but from a false perception of the importance of respect for political pluralism and for human rights and democracy. Discrimination and unfair treatment mean different things for different people. During my own research in Moscow, I conducted several interviews both with officials and with people on the streets. Most officials categorically stated that there is no such thing as discrimination against immigrants from the Caucasus in Moscow, only insults or jokes at a personal level and the occasional check by the police. . . If these are not acts of discrimination, then what is? For most Russians whom I interviewed, at least, discrimination refers to an official political line or official government practices against certain groups of people; anything done unofficially, at an everyday level, is merely an insult or a bad joke.

This brings me to my last point. Attitudes and behaviour do not always overlap in the Russian case. Scholars specializing in Russian political culture agree that in every Russian there exists a *dual persona*: a public persona, which expresses attachment to perceived official values, and a private persona that secretly opposes them. Yuri Levada famously referred to the Russians’ incredible ability to hold two contradictory opinions at the same time as reminiscent of Orwell’s “doublethink.” In this case, certain Moscow residents I had interviewed during my research, both Russian as well as immigrants from the Caucasus, had not only argued that there was no such thing as ethnic and religious discrimination in Moscow, and in Russia in general, but also that “discrimination and xenophobia are all unfounded claims by western organizations who establish themselves in Russia in order to spy on us and undermine our country.” The police checks and the humiliation that I had to face being mistaken for Azerbaijani, Georgian or Chechen were testimony that such claims were not completely unfounded. But Russian residents of Moscow did not want to admit to an “outsider” that they were facing problems, as they prefer to deal with their own issues themselves without external intervention. And residents from the Caucasus were mostly

afraid to voice any concerns to “outsiders.” Most of the immigrants I interviewed declined to state their real names. I remember in spring 2000 a Chechen head of a humanitarian organization, whose name I do not wish to disclose, stated with absolute conviction that relations between Chechens and Russians in Moscow are friendly, that there are no problems neither at an official nor at an everyday level, and that there is no such thing as discrimination. His wife, who was bringing the coffee at the time, raised her finger and corrected him: “don’t forget that they still refuse to register me in Moscow!” The conversation continued while the man was constantly trying to save face. In the end, he was the one who said that in Russia they prefer to settle their affairs on their own, amongst themselves without outside interference.