

Age and gender bias in Russia's assistance to forced migrants?

by Larisa Kosygina

Since the collapse of the Soviet Union, more than three million Russians and members of other ethnic groups have left the other former Soviet republics to take up residence in the Russian Federation. Their integration into their 'historical fatherland' – and particularly addressing their housing needs – is one of the main concerns of Russia's migration policy.

This article argues that the state programme designed to help the 1.5 million officially registered forced migrants find accommodation discriminates against its clients by age and gender. This is a result both of retention of the norms of the Soviet Union's Housing Code and the informal practices of the officials charged with programme implementation.

When forced migrants arrive in Russia they often live in very poor conditions. State assistance includes two mechanisms to improve their living conditions: a ten-year interest-free mortgage and provision of free accommodation. In theory each person has the right to apply for both of these within five years of his/her registration as a forced migrant. In practice, however, the second option is possible only for those fortunate enough to remain in the so-called 'privileged queue', membership of which is determined by the pro-natalist and patriotic housing policies adopted by the USSR.

When these preferences are applied to the programme for helping forced migrants to obtain accommodation, the use of these Soviet norms exclude a range of people – those who are not officially recognised single mothers (women who give birth to a child within a marriage but subsequently divorce or widows), single fathers and all those old-aged pensioners who are not teachers, doctors, Second World War veterans, labour heroes or people with disabilities. These excluded people do not have the right to stay in the privileged queue and thus have

little opportunity to obtain free accommodation.

They also experience difficulties with the interest-free loan. The rules for calculation of the mortgage state that the amount of money distributed to families is directly proportional to the number of family members working in the formal labour market. The fewer the family members who work, the lower the payments. Families of single parents and old-aged pensioners are often unable to qualify for a sufficiently large enough loan to buy accommodation which meets the requirements contained in the legislation.

Discriminatory practices

Research in the Novosibirsk region of Western Siberia showed how civil servants administering housing loans ignore the regulation that even those with very small incomes are entitled to apply for an interest-free loan. They discourage people with low incomes from applying by telling them that their income is insufficient. Thus low-income forced migrants do not even collect a loan application form or wait until officials advise them that their income is sufficient for them to do so.

Federal law states that a forced migrant can take an interest-free loan if he/she has either two guarantors or signs a contract of pledge with the Migration Service. These conditions were introduced to secure loan repayments. If a forced migrant cannot repay the loan then his/her guarantors will do so, or, in the case of the

contract of pledge, the accommodation will revert to the state. Though the law does not specify an upper age limit for signatories of loan agreements, officials in the Novosibirsk region routinely prevent the elderly from doing so. This is despite the fact that some pensioners have sufficient income to repay loans – nowadays in economically depressed regions of Russia a pension can be a more stable income source than a salary.

Conclusion

What can be done to ensure that the housing programme for forced migrants returns to its declared aim of reducing social tension and maximising access to accommodation?

- Gender and age inequalities must be acknowledged and addressed.
- Criteria for the right to be in the privileged queue for free accommodation must be changed.
- Low-income families must be added to the privileged group when the new housing code is considered by the State Duma (parliament) in autumn 2004.
- Administrative practices which discourage low-income forced migrants from applying for mortgages and prevent pensioners from signing agreements must be eliminated.
- Forced migrants should be given access to legal information and advice so that they can recognise violations of their rights and seek legal redress.

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