

The role of migrant organisations and personal networks in the Russian Federation

by Moya Flynn

As state assistance is limited, some migrants in the Russian Federation have set up their own organisations, which are proving to be a growing force for assistance, advocacy and reform.

The widespread upheaval brought about by the collapse of the Soviet Union in 1991 prompted ongoing large-scale population movements. The most significant is that of ethnic Russians and Russian-speaking people from the other former Soviet Republics to the Russian Federation. In the period 1991-2002 the Russian Federation registered some 1.5 million 'forced migrants' or 'refugees'. It is estimated that the total number of people who have arrived from the former Soviet republics is 8-10 million. As the state has only provided limited assistance a number of non-governmental migrants' organisations have emerged to try to fill the gap.

At the federal level there are three main Moscow-based NGOs: the Civic Assistance Committee (CAC), the Coordinating Council for Aid to Refugees and Forced Migrants (CCARFM),¹ and the Forum of Migrant Organisations. CAC was set up in 1990 to assist refugees fleeing violence in Azerbaijan. CCARFM was an off-shoot of CAC, formed in 1993 to unite other Moscow organisations providing assistance to refugees and forced migrants. The Forum of Migrant Organisations was created in 1996 as an umbrella organisation for the network of regional migrant organisations in the Russian Federation.

The federal-level organisations play an important role in welcoming migrants, representing their views and lobbying for adequate service provision and viable resettlement policies. They provide practical and legal assistance to individual migrants and to regional migrant organisations. Their involvement in the CIS Conference on Refugees and Forced Migrants held in Geneva in May 1996 and in the subsequent Programme of Action encouraged further NGO

development and stimulated the development of links between international, national and regional government and NGOs.

Initially hostile relations between the NGOs and Russian government bodies improved during the 1990s as a result of NGO efforts and their inclusion within institutional structures (which allowed limited participation in legislative development). However, the transfer of responsibility for migration affairs to the Russian Ministry of Internal Affairs in October 2001 – a move that was highly criticised by NGOs – led to a deterioration of relations between NGOs and the government.

Regional organisations

Regional migrant organisations are primarily the initiatives of migrants themselves and provide both practical assistance and effective advocacy. They provide general and legal information unavailable or difficult to access from state structures; small monetary payments, clothes or food vouchers; advice on employment and housing; and information about resettlement opportunities. They work to raise awareness of migrant issues within state structures, to direct state attention to areas of concern, to influence regional policy and practice and to present the arrival of migrants as regionally and nationally beneficial.

In Saratov and Novosibirsk there is a generally receptive policy towards in-migration. In Saratov the migration service recognises the need to work with the migrant organisations, acknowledging that they provide additional help to specific categories of migrants. Despite a general perception that the organisations are unprofessional and insufficiently informed, the migration service invited

them to participate in a Coordinating Council to foster government/non-governmental debate around the nature of regional policy towards migration.

In Samara, however, the migrant organisation *Samarskii pereselenets* faces an uncooperative and critical attitude from the migration service. Although invited to participate in a regional Coordinating Council set up in 1999, *Samarskii pereselenets* was frequently excluded from wider regional government debate. In Novosibirsk *Ruka pomoshchi* has had limited involvement in regional migration debates and the Novosibirsk migration service maintains that migration should remain a state concern. The negative attitudes of state structures towards migrants' organisations reflects the reluctance of the Russian state to accept a role for civil society in tackling social issues.

Securing funding to keep migrant organisations running is difficult and all depend on securing international grants. Links with Moscow-based organisations provide essential information and direct access to the wider federal and international migration regimes, which, in turn, facilitates recognition at the regional level.

Migrant perceptions

In the face of a confusing array of state structures and legislation concerning forced migrant resettlement, migrants see the organisations as a mediating structure between the individual and the state. They help facilitate a sense of socio-cultural belonging and security. Russians returning from the former republics of the Soviet Union experience not only the problems of physical displacement and subsequent resettlement but also cultural displacement. They are moving from a familiar environment to one which, because it is their 'historic homeland', is often

expected to feel like home but which in many ways is unknown and unfamiliar. The migrant organisations try to create an environment where migrants discover and foster feelings of common identity.

Many migrants, however, after experiencing government indifference, perceive migrant organisations as yet another official structure in which they have little faith. Ironically, the migrant organisations are sometimes criticised precisely because they are not official structures, and so lack real power to effect change or offer substantial help.

For some migrants, the organisations provide concrete help and support and the beginnings of a social network to help them cope with the experiences of displacement and dislocation. For many others, however, family and friendship networks are more important. Migrants often move to be close to family or friends who had previously moved to Russia and who can provide

information about employment and accommodation. Family and friends help maintain and recreate familiar habits, customs and traditions. Similarly, new friendships with other migrants, or relationships with old acquaintances that become closer through the experience of migration, help to foster feelings of familiarity and security.

Conclusion

The development and activities of regional and federal migrant organisations reflect major changes in Russia over the past decade:

- Although engagement of the migrant community with organisations at a regional level is sometimes limited, the organisations are themselves migrant initiatives and are a vital source of practical and psychological support.
- Migrant organisations and informal networks indirectly foster the building of connections with the state, contributing to the

regeneration of social, economic and political life.

- At both the regional and federal level, migrant organisations have had significant input into policy-making and legislative development and are influencing the nature of Russia's emerging migration regime.

Continued assistance (financial, material and information) by federal organisations, western donors and international organisations is essential in order to foster the growth of NGOs and to counter Russian government indifference, scepticism and hostility towards non-governmental actors.

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