

## Postcolonial migrations in Russia

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**Postcolonial migrations in Russia: the racism, informality  
and discrimination nexus**

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**Purpose**

The paper contributes to the challenges of bringing postcolonial, racism and migration research into a meaningful dialogue. Based on research examining migration from Central Asia into Russia the paper analyses migration policy and the everyday experiences of migrants.

**Design/methodology approach**

The paper is based on mixed methodologies, including narrative, semi-structured and in-depth interviews with migrants from Uzbekistan, Tajikistan and Kyrgyzstan in Russian cities and those who returned to their country of origin (over 300 people), interviews with representatives of NGOs, state officials and journalists in 2013-2016 and an analysis of the legislation and mass-media regarding migration from Central Asia.

**Findings**

The paper demonstrates that experiencing racism is part of everyday life for migrants from Central Asia living in Russia. Whether this is in interactions with the state, fear of persecution on the street by the police or in the workplace, it is a constant factor. It argues that political and everyday xenophobia and racism demonstrates deeply rooted imperial views in Russia's inner politics and shapes attitudes towards migrants.

**Social implications**

The paper contributes to broader debates on the linkages between migration and racism in Europe, in particularly questioning the positionality of migrants from 'not-European' countries.

**Originality/value**

Mbembe's approach to 'let die' is pertinent in understanding post-colonial migration. Racism continually plays a role in 'normalisation' of abuse towards migrants and restrictive migration policy. Blaming 'the migrant' for acting informally, draining health care resources and for posing a security risk provides a much-needed scapegoat for the state.

**Keywords:** migration; racism, Central Asia; Russia; racism; discrimination; Eurasian Economic Union; post-colonialism

**Introduction**

Russia is not only the second largest recipient of migrants, after the USA, but it has received the largest number of post-colonial migrants since the Second World War. By 2000 there were more than 6 million migrants to Russia from post-Soviet countries, surpassing the scale of postcolonial migration in USA (4.3 millions) and France and the United Kingdom (both 2 million) (Bosma, Lucasen and Oostindie, 2012, p. 5). Given its scale and character immigration to Russia was a key outcome of the Soviet Union's collapse, and one which still has deep impacts on Russia's society over 25 years later. It was facilitated by the Commonwealth of Independent States' creation in 1991, establishing visa-free migration regimes amongst its members and migration from these countries is almost ten times higher than from so-called 'far abroad'. For example, in 2013, officially, 422,738 people arrived

from CIS countries, with 59,503 arriving from elsewhere (International Organization of Migration, 2015, p. 38). Such mass migration from CIS into Russia is influenced not only by the visa-free regime, but also by the close economic, political, and personal relations between these countries. However, currently, the major driver is the disparities in economic development, which bring labor migration into Russia (Round and Kuznetsova, 2016). Extremely low salaries in Tajikistan and Kyrgyzstan sees, for example, approximately ten percent of Tajiks circulating between their home country and the countries of their employment (Russia and Kazakhstan) and the number of Kyrgyz citizens engaged in temporary employment abroad is between five and ten percent (International Organization of Migration, 2015, p. 29). This sees Tajikistan and Kyrgyzstan as the top two remittance receivers in the world, equating to 42.1% and 31.5% of their GDP respectively (Ibid, p. 38). The participation of Kyrgyzstan in the Eurasian Economic Union as acceding state from 2015 introduced special labor migration regime, which reduced bureaucracy and complexity for Kyrgyz migrants. As Kudaiberdenova notes, 'the issue of migration is one of the driving forces for political elites in Kyrgyzstan to accept the ideas of their own Eurasian integration' (2016, p. 105). Given the scale of the migrations, particularly since the official figures do not reflect the true size of the movements, it is crucial that the political, socio-economic and everyday experiences of the processes receive academic attention.

While there is a wide body of work examining the experiences of Central Asian migrants in Russia (see, for example, Abashin, 2014a; Nasritdinov, 2016; Reeves, 2013), this paper uses post-colonial, racism and discrimination lenses to address it. This approach, it is argued, is important as it enables the migrant everyday to be detailed within the context of government (in)action and disgust (see also Round and Kuznetsova, 2016). This has a global resonance in migration studies as contemporary migration is shaped, symbiotically, by state and media as a 'crisis' and the cause of the titular population's ills. With the Russian state overt in its attitudes towards migrants, as disposable 'units' to be worked to exhaustion with no protection, and its practices provide insights into the actions/thoughts of European centre-right governments. Cole and Kandiyoti (2002) delineate several periods of the 'colonial' era: 'informal imperialism, formal colonial domination, and neo-colonialism'. They argue that while the Czarist colonization of Turkestan in Central Asia, from the 1860s, had similarities with the French project in North Africa, 'the intervening Soviet period, 1917–91, introduced specificities and peculiarities into the relationship of metropole and periphery' (ibid, p. 190). These 'peculiarities' can be seen in the discussions over to what extent the Soviet Union was

an empire (Beissinger, 1993; Dawisha and Parrott, 1997; Martin, 2001; Motyl, 2001; Suny, 2006 among others) and are often discussed in relation to issues around post-Soviet nation-building, resurgent ethnic identities and religious issues (see Abashin, 2014b; Khalid, 2007; Chari and Verdery, 2009; Tlostanova, 2012). As Sahadeo noted 'certain inequalities similar to those in Western states persisted, complicating the integration of migrants from peripheral regions of the USSR' (2007, p. 560), and dramatically increased after the collapse of the Union.

The paper examines how post-colonial attitudes put everyday and political pressures onto Central Asian labour migrants, ultimately constructing them as subjects of disgust. To begin this, it first employs a postcolonial theoretical lenses to analyse the changes in Russian migration policy, detailing its racialisation, it then it addresses how this is reflected in the racism that occurs around the informalities of everyday life that migrants endure. It then details migrants' portrayal in political rethorics, which routinely stigmatizes migrants from post-soviet states, revealing everyday xenophobia towards them. It is important to do this as while the position of Central Asian migrants has received attention, there remains a gap in how it is embedded into political and everyday discourses and how xenophobia is transferred into racism. The paper thus contributes to broader debates on the linkages between migration, nationalism, and racism in Europe, in particularly questioning the positionality of migrants from 'not-European' countries.

**Methodology.** The discussions below are based on numerous projects conducted by the authors between 2013-16, which examine the everyday experience of migrants into Russia from Central Asia, and the political practices and discourses that surround them. In total over three hundred interviews have been conducted with migrants from Uzbekistan, Tajikistan and Kyrgyzstan as well as interviews with political, media and cultural 'elites'. Mixed methodologies were used, including narrative, semi-structured and in-depth interviews, with the aim of taking the most appropriate approach for each particular respondent. With migrants, the in-depth interview was used at the start, and then depending on the context and willingness of informant to tell a story on a particular case, the narrative method was used. This approach was taken as narratives and storytelling have a great potential 'for providing a voice to minorities and other underrepresented communities' (De Fina and Tseng, 2017, p.382). The snowball technique was used to select informants, via groups in social media, NGOs or social networks, as a method widely used in studying confidential topics or hidden communities. Each time a person gave multiple referral only one new subject was recruited

among them (Atkinson and Flint, 2001) with different cut age, gender, and length of stay in Russia. Having such diverse set of data, the qualitative analysis of interviews were underdone. Interviews with migrants were anonymous, and all names used below are pseudonyms. Furthermore, extensive discourse analysis of political statements, policy documents, and media outputs were undertaken.

Postcolonialism, decoloniality and the racialization of migrationThe presence of postsocialist, postcolonial and postimperial overtones are constant in contemporary Russian politics, be it the annexation of Crimea, territorial disputes with Japan or anti-NATO rhetoric used to put pressure on the Baltic states. As Tlostanova (2012, p. 114) argues the post-Soviet ideological void led to the increasing use of 'nostalgia and recycled imperial and nationalist myths' by the Russian State. This, argues Chari and Verdery (2009, p. 12), enabled the rise of state-sanctioned racism, through the process of racializing internal and external enemies, which is around not automatically along ethnic lines but via 'institutional and biopolitical mechanisms, which differentiate populations into subgroups having varied access to means of life and death'. Such institutional and biopolitical processes can include, to be discussed further below, issues around language, the perceived health of 'the migrant', the criminalization of the body and economic status. This 'new racism' is based on the constructed imaginaries of cultural difference and production which is expressed through the fear of the 'other' (Blaut, 1992). As Fanon (1967), noted these leads to the creation of spaces which can be characterized as 'zone of being' which are characterized by regulation and emancipation and 'zone of non-being' where people face violence and dispossession. These zones exist and operate not only between on a global scales between counties, but also within urban areas and states in general (see Cross and Keith 1993). Racialization as it defined by Omi and Winant is the "the sociohistorical process by which racial categories are created, inhabited, transformed, and destroyed.... Race is a matter of both social structure and cultural representation" (Omi and Winant, 1994, pp. 55–56).

Given the extremely uneven economic development of the post-socialist states, the racism enabled through post-colonial economic relationships is of great importance, especially when seen through the lens of decolonization. Given that Russia's GDP in 2016 per capita (8747.4 US dollars) was eleven times higher that of Tajikistan and 8 times higher then in Kyrgyzstan (World Bank, 2016) with the latter, as noted above, dependent on remittances sent from the former. Thus Russia holds enormous geopolitical power over the Central Asian states as visa regime changes, increasing state-



sponsored racism towards migrants and/or changes to migrant rights has massive implications for the sending country. In short, they are forced into colonial (Soviet) style subservience through their dependence on the Russian economy. For the individual migrant, this translates into precarity, at best, as the employer knows that they, and their family, are dependent on them for work. In reality, the worker is without rights as their sending country's geopolitical weakness within the decolonial framework means they cannot demand the fair treatment of their migrants. As it is discussed below these racisms beyond ethnicity can be a matter of life or death, be it the sudden death on a worksite where health and safety regulations are ignored and where workers have scant training (as the migrant workers do not 'deserve' either), or the 'slow death' of the loss of home, identity and rights over the body. Mbembe's (2003) conception of necropolitics encapsulates this as he argues this move beyond biopolitics is not just about killing but also the sovereign's decision on those who can be left to die. He demonstrates how colonial attitudes towards death under the apartheid regime were continued into the postcolonial period. Here 'to let die' refers to how the individual's access to healthcare, safety, legal processes and defense from aggressors is restricted by the state they reside in. Crucial to the discussions below he explored the social-political construction of the other through 'cultural imaginaries,' which enables the 'the enactment of differential rights to differing categories of people for different purposes within the same space; in brief, the exercise of sovereignty' (Ibid, p. 26).

Grosfoguel et al (2015) suggest that there is still a need for migration theory to analyse transnational migratory experiences through a colonial legacy lens, incorporating the role of race and racism into migration processes. Moreover, they state that, with some exceptions issues of discrimination, xenophobia and racism are often invisible in 'migration studies', with more accent given to 'objective' barriers such as culture (attitudes, behavior, mentality, values, etc.) or the economy (class origin, economic crisis, market factors, etc.). Given that the increasing migration flows both within the EU, from East to West Europe, and economic migrants from Global South and refugees from North Africa to the EU has led to increasing levels of discrimination there is an urgent need to further interrogate the nexus between race and migration. Viewing race as a political project rooted in colonialism and imperialism, Kibria et al (2013, p.5) characterize this nexus as 'a fluid and intertwined bundle of linkages between race and immigration, specifically among the institutions, ideologies, and practices that define these arenas'. At the same time, issues of race are often overlooked in contemporary migration studies (Lentin 2014), and there is an urgent need to address the role of racialization and colonality in Europe's migration policies (Mignolo, 2012; Möschel 2011). Umut, Murji, and Nahaboo (2016) have begun to fill this lacuna by identifying three

elements of the nexus; changing migrations, complex migrations and post-racial migrations. The first suggests that while migration streams change attitudes towards migrants are based on 'traditional' racial attitudes. The latter calls into question whether racism is a useful analytical tool when explores the problems migrants face when attempting to integrate into a new community. While, not denying the importance of these, and space precludes a full examination of their relationships to post-colonialism, the idea of 'complex migrations' is most relevant to the discussions below. This approach, they argue, still recognizes that racism is central to understanding migration experiences but also incorporates ideas of intersectionality and geography. This multidimensional racializing is central to state policy and the everyday lives of migrants in Russia. This goes against Zakharov's (2013, 2015) arguments that racism in Russia is visual, because as is shown below, particular groups are 'whitened' or 'darkened' (Fox et al, 2012) according to political expediency. Hence the below discussions are based on the idea that exploring racism in Russia through a migration, postcolonialism, and racism Nexus allows a not only in-depth view on migrants' everyday lives and politics, but brings migration into the broader context of the inequality, discrimination, and experiences living in a 'zone of non-being' as constructed through state and media lead necropolitical approaches.

### **Migration policy and racialization**

Since 2000 migration policy in Russia has looked to both control the levels of movement into the country and further restrict the rights of labor migrants (see Malakhov 2014, Kuznetsova 2017, Schenk, 2018). The abolishing of a system of quotas for labor migrants in 2015, and introducing patents, was a big relief for many migrants and employers. Abolishing language test and a work permit for labor migrants from Kyrgyzstan from August 2016 as a part of Eurasian Economic Union deal aimed to improve their documented status and make the employment easier. But nevertheless as it will be showed bellow, there are still a lot of pressure and uncertainty for lots of those who came to work to Russia.

In 2013, there was introduced the entry ban for those who had two administrative law violations in the country. In 2014, the number of visa-free days for Central Asian migrants decreased from 180 to 90 days. Then in 2015 it became law that a migrant with two or more administrative law violations or one migration law violation must leave the country within five days. That is what Kubal (2016, 2017) calls the "spiral effect of the law": when a minor administrative violation can draw migrants into more serious violations, resulting in a 5- or 10-year re-entry ban. While these laws might, on paper, seem a rational response to a chaotic migration regime, their enactment reveals much about



the racist nature of the Russian state and its representatives. As Voronkov, Gradirev and Sagitova (2011) discuss, migrants are far more likely to be stopped by the police in Russia and are extremely vulnerable. The administrative law violations are petty, such as an unpaid driving penalty or living in an apartment where you are not registered, which for Russian citizens would have little impact on their daily lives. Civil rights activists and NGO leaders, interviewed for this paper, discuss how arrest often sees the violation of migrants' human rights. This is substantiated through migrant interviews. One leading Civil Rights leader, whose organization attempts to protect the legal rights of migrants and asylum seekers, discussed how towards the end of the month, when quotas, have to be met the police simply 'sweep up' migrants and charge them with any crime/violation they see fit. In court, migrants discuss, they often don't have access to their case documents and interpreters were often not available. They are pressured into signing away their rights as they are threatened with long term incarceration unless they 'admit' to the charges and agree to expulsion from the country. Thus the court becomes a production line to meet unofficial deportation targets with one court in Moscow 'considering' up 42 cases per hour. This has resulted in the number of citizens of CIS banned from entry to Russia increasing more than nine times between 2013 and 2015, with over 1.6 million foreigners expelled and banned from Russia (Troitsky, 2016). As a result, approximately four percent of the total population of Tajikistan, or more than half from those who worked in Russia in 2015 were banned from Russia (figures from Troitsky, 2016). As our study, and Nikiforova and Brednikova's (2018), show, deportation and its fear separate families between Central Asia and Russia.

The situation when legislation prescribes to deport an immigrant a minor offense, such as a minor traffic violation, which would have little consequence for an ethnic Russian citizen has been called the 'ethnicization' of politics (Gulina, 2015). It is argued here that it not only the ethnicization but a racialization as the likelihood of getting stopped by the police increases dramatically if you do not 'look' Russian. From observing police on the streets and in metro stations, it is clear that the only people that are stopped 'at random' are people who look like migrants. It is lost in the mists of legislation as to whether the police can demand documents on the streets without any evidence of a crime been committed but it is a regular occurrence. Furthermore, it is not only the police who undertake random checks but also self-appointed defenders of Russia such as Moscow Shield or Cossack groups who, with the tacit blessing of the state, involve themselves in the everyday lives of migrants. The stopping of migrants on the street is clearly a racial process and one which the victims become accustomed to. One respondent, who has worked in Russia for more than for 20

years, said that sometimes the police check his documents twice per day, sometimes one-two times per month. As he admits they do not automatically 'demand' a bribe, but 'if you do not give them some money for beer, they will not let you go, and then you will miss your work' (Maruf, 51 years old, Moscow, 2015). All migrants have to develop strategies to cope with such encounters or they will face arbitrary punishment. As another migrant says:

*To check passport of every migrant because he is 'black' is not right if you have a registration or temporally residency permit. I am dark and visible in a crowd, but I am also able to answer their questions, and when a person answers back, they become afraid (female, 33 years old, Kazan, from Kyrgyzstan, 2015).*

This notion that if one stands up to the police demonstrates the racialization of the issue. The police if someone stands up for themselves decide that it is not worth the trouble of dealing with them and simply move onto the next 'target' in the hope that they are more vulnerable.

The introduction of Russian language and cultural exams for migrant workers coming to Russia provides further evidence of the racialization of migration policy. The exams were targeted at CIS migrants as migrants from the EU and 'highly skilled' migrants (this is based on income not skill level and is easily circumnavigated by corrupt employees) are exempt. The introduction of the exams was rapid and took many workers by surprise. While the state and media construct Central Asian migrants as unable to understand basic Russian the reality is that most of them have a good level of the language. What was more problematic was the cultural elements of the exams and the informality that surrounds them. As one interviewee said:

*There are such questions as about Nicolas 1<sup>st</sup>, Borodin, who first received the first Saint George Order... well, why do you ask that?! If to look at these questions, nobody can answer them. We even asked a former military man: in which year the first Saint George Order was issued and even he did not know the answer! (female, 39 years old, often works in Russia but was deported, Bishkek, Kyrgyzstan, 2015) [1].*

As with such exams elsewhere, such as in the UK (Byrne, 2016) many citizens are unable to answer questions which have nothing to do with cultural, or integration, but rather the requirement to learn facts. Furthermore, the exams increased the financial burden for labor migrants, most of having a salary lower than the regional average, and come with a new set of administrative barriers.

Interviewees repeatedly said that the need to pass the exam within 30 days of arrival was too short a

period, especially given the need to register their work permit and place of residence. Often employers don't provide the time needed, and if they can be absent, they go unpaid. Furthermore, the 'regional' exam is not valid at the Federal level which adds a further cost and time burden. There is not space here to debate fully the social construction of such test, and their success in raising 'integration' levels, but at the most basic level, as The Presidential Council on Civil Society and Human Rights notes, the need to learn legal and historical issues is not necessary for workers who are moving to the country on a temporary basis [2]. Unsurprisingly, the tests have become spaces of corruption and extortion, with one interviewee stating "they take money from Uzbeks even if they can pass an exam anyway (...). There are also some people who take money to 'help' pass the Russian language test" (see also Ruget 2018).

In these new migration policy steps in Russia, and similar to tendencies in the EU, language and values often serve as a 'post-racial mask' for the racializing migrants (Lentin and Titley 2011). Using their mother tongue language for migrants becomes one of their features, in addition to their physical appearance, and is a marker for the police who upon hearing it will want to check documents. Furthermore, using their home language at work is not welcomed even if it has no bearing on the work that they are doing, and it is not considered appropriate on the streets, as one interviewee recounted: "They are always humiliating us or telling us something negative [if someone overhears them speaking Kyrgyz]. For example, if I talk to my friend to my brother in my native language I am criticized immediately; they want us to talk in Russian. They do not like it, yes" (female, 25 years old, works in Moscow, from Kyrgyzstan).

In an article about the exams a leading national newspaper used not only racial comments about those taking the exam, such as point out their hair color, but also detailed the classification given to them by one of the teachers. They quoted 'Asians are very shy, and you cannot talk to them (...) They are very weak to follow the program. Tajiks and Uzbeks are practically not teachable. But Armenians, Turkish and Ukrainians – learn very well' [3]. The testing is also very selective as people from countries or territories where Russian is one of the official languages do not have to take the test and nor do people educated in the USSR. Furthermore, people from the so-called Donetsk and Luhansk People's Republics, South Ossetia and Transnistria can take the test at a reduced cost, underlining the special relationship Russia has with these territories and further embeds an ethnic hierarchy amongst migrants.

### **Between being undocumented and 'documented': issues around informality**

Consistently migrant interviewees discussed how the need to pay bribes was commonplace and took place at almost every stage of their journey to Russia, during their time there and through their departure. For seasonal workers, who came without families, bribes are required at border crossings, during the registration process, at the workplace and if they are stopped by the police on the street. This talks directly to Mbeme's discussions on how migrant labor was abused with impunity due to the existence of post-colonial power relations in South Africa. In Russia, the migrant is not only seen as a worker to be poorly paid but as a vulnerable body, with no recourse to either the sending or receiving state, on which various state actors can prey upon. The fact that Tajikistan and Kyrgyzstan's economies are so weak, due in part to the Soviet colonial development planned by Moscow, means that they are dependent on the remittances generated in Russia. Thus at the state and individual level little power is held about Russia and thus a post-colonial style control is placed over the migrants. For those who move to Russia on a longer term basis, there are even more points where bribes have to be paid and the sums are not insubstantial. Sabina (name changed, interview, Kazan 2015), 33 years old with a higher education, arrived to Kazan in 2014 with her husband and three children. Firstly, she discussed why they had to move from Tajikistan: "...in my country there is no stability, jobs, no future for kids, but I have children, and they need to receive an education. And while we are young, we would like to settle down, and we want to live in a more stable country, where some laws work".

While they arrived with the expectation that 'laws work' in Russia, the reality was soon discovered as they were forced into informal relations with the state from the very beginning. Renting a flat was problematic and provided an early insight into the racism that they would face: "Its very difficult because, firstly, they are scared of migrants, because if a person from the different state and moreover Asian they have a different mentality and owners of flat charge more. But then you have to accept it even if conditions there are terrible."

Entry to primary school for her children had xenophobic undertones as her child had to pass an oral language test with a deputy head teacher and she was not able to be in the room when it took place. There is no requirement for such a test to enter a school in Russia. Furthermore, she had to pay a ten thousand roubles informal payment to ensure his entry. To receive a temporary residence permit Sabina had to book an appointment, which was impossible to do as the only way to arrange it was via telephone, the line of which was always busy. She found out through friends that it was possible to arrange an appointment informally by paying forty thousand roubles, thought this did not come with any guarantee of successfully receiving the residency permit. The 'cost' of receiving the permit

was a sixty thousand rouble bribe; this was noted by numerous interviewees. They all discussed how the practices of the Migration Service were humiliating as they are forced to queue for days, endure rude staff and often at the end of the process did not receive the required documentation. The restructuring of the Migration Services functions in 2015 added more delays and confusion as well, as well as increasing the number of places where informal payments could be requested. In 2015 significant changes occurring in the Russian migration system with labour migrants (with the exception of citizens of the Eurasian Economic Union – Armenia, Belarus, Kazakhstan, and Kyrgyzstan) now able to buy a patent to allow them to work in Russia legally. It has to be brought within 30 days of arrival and gives the right to work only in the location it was purchased within and only in the job specified in the document. The cost of the patent varies by region, but the federal government sets the basic price, which changes every year. For example, in Moscow, the 2016 patent costs 4200 Rubles. During 2017 foreign workers transferred 14 billion roubles to the Moscow's budget which is according to Moscow's Mayor Sobyenin is more than Rosneft, a major oil company, brings to the city [4]. It had to make the process of employment easier for both migrants and employers. The chief of what was the Migration Service, Romadanovsky believed that it could help some undocumented migrants to 'legalize' their work in Russia, and discussed the possibility of an amnesty for migrants working illegally, but this did not happen. Unsurprisingly the introduction of the patent system did not stymie the informal economy around migrant work. Interviewees discussed how when stopped by the police they would still be asked for bribes as the officers would simply claim that the patent was a fake. Rather than risk ending up in court, with the problems as noted above, they simply pay what is required. Furthermore, not every migrant has the right to purchase a patent.

Migrants thus find themselves in a limbo whereby even if they are allowed to work formally it does not provide protection from the police or access to stable employment. The ambiguities, and corruption, in the labor system, means that they endure low paid work, often short term and without any form of contract (see also Heusala and Aitamurto, 2016; Urinboyev and Polese, 2016), and even become victims of human trafficking (Buckley 2018). Before the patent reform, survey of migrants conducted in Tatarstan, showed that around 55 percent work fully informally, with a similar figure obtained from interviewees in Moscow (Kuznetsova and Mucharyamova, 2014). As result of this informality in Tatarstan, ten percent regularly received lower wages than agreed and over a quarter this had happened to them on numerous occasions.

The conditions of work and life of migrants from Central Asia in Russia is often comparable to the experiences of Caribbean migrants in the USA, UK, Netherlands, and France after the Second World War (Kasinitz, 1992). The racism underlies it. As Grosfoguel (1999, p. 431) notes:

*...racism works both ways: to justify the reproduction of a cheap labor force and to exclude populations from the labor market. (...) In both cases, a cultural racist discourse has been mobilized to justify either a low-wage incorporation or marginalization from the labor market regarding cultural behavior, habits and values that do not fit the dominant imagined community.*

Interviews with Kyrgyz migrants suggest that many believe that they would face fewer employment issues when Kyrgyzstan signs an agreement with the Eurasian Union because fewer documents will be needed to work and live in Russia. However, it is argued here that this will not be the case as the issue is around racism, not administrative burdens. As the above has shown due to the deep-rooted racism in the state and its actors having entirely formal paperwork does not provide any protection in the majority of cases.

### **Racism in everyday language: experiences of migrants**

Everyday racism is widely supported by the Russian mass-media. As Shnirelman (2007) pointed out 'if in the middle and second part of the 1990s Chechens were portrayed as the main enemy, at the beginning of the 2000s (...), the mass-media started the active cultivation of a negative image of migrants'. Russian television provides a mirror how Russia struggles between the Soviet legacy of ethnic particularism, weak civil society and increasing isolationist popular ethnonationalism (Hutchings and Tolz, 2015).

The fear of migrants was one of the major campaign tools in the Mayor of Moscow election held in 2013 and was expressed through racist language. For example, the incumbent, Sergei Sobyenin bizarrely claimed that if 'illegal immigrants' were banished from Moscow then it would become the world's safest city, he went on to say that the crimes 'they' commit are not cases saying that it was not a case of 'banal theft' but 'crimes against life and health' (Moskovskye Novosti, 2013). The main challenger, Alexei Navalny, went further by saying that migrants 'aren't going to die of starvation if they don't find work. One can grab a purse in the metro; one can take somebody's money away in the elevator with a knife' (Navalny, 2013). With political leaders repeating such inflammatory statements it is no surprise that such discourses enter into public discourses. The verbal abuse of migrants at work is commonplace. One interviewee discussed how they were described as 'creatures' by Russian colleges and another, who had obtained Russian citizenship,



1  
2  
3 stated that although he was treated ok he always received the worst shifts and equipment and was  
4 excluded from most conversations. All of the problems migrants face, as discussed above,  
5 facilitated by the state and mass media's construction of migrants as diseased and criminal, which in  
6 turn becomes embedded into cultural imaginations (Round and Kuznetsova, 2016). Migrants from  
7 Central Asia have the highest odds of reporting harassment regardless legal status but due to race  
8 (Agadjanian et al, 2017).  
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14 The children of migrants also face racialization. One interviewee, from Kyrgyzstan, for example,  
15 mentioned that a school director said did not want to take her child to the same age class because  
16 'well, from Central Asia they all say they are 'outstanding,' but they struggle to be even below  
17 average here' (female, 35 years old, 2015). For some migrants, this fear became a barrier to settling  
18 in Russia, with one interviewee discussing why they do not live as a family in Russia, but rather in  
19 Osh:  
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24 *My husband is a Russian citizen and works in Sakhalin, and I am here with children. He did not*  
25 *want to take us there; because of he afraid that his kids will be called 'churka' [a humiliating*  
26 *nickname for Asian and Caucasian people] which will impact on our children's mental well-being*  
27 *(female, Osh, Kyrgyzstan, 2015).*  
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30 This xenophobia makes some Central Asian citizens choose different trajectories for migration. One  
31 interviewee discussed how his son was going to work in South Korea after numerous negative  
32 experiences in Russia:  
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35 *..they pay more then in Russia. The working conditions are better as well, and they treat workers as*  
36 *the human being and communicate with them equally, and even if you are ill the doctor can come in*  
37 *spite the fact that you are a guest worker. Foreigners there are not afraid to walk there on the*  
38 *weekend or during the week, the police do not disturb them. In Russia, it is all opposite (Osh, 2015).*  
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41 Some interviewees are Russian citizens but still consider themselves as foreigners. One Uzbek from  
42 Tajikistan with a higher education and who received Russian citizenship two years previously said  
43 'if you would like to receive a good job, you will not be able to because of 'face control,' referring  
44 to his Asian appearance (Interview, Moscow 2014). Citing growing xenophobia he wants to leave  
45 "if I can I am going to move from Russia. It is so negative here towards because we are not from  
46 Russia". Many labour migrants, without a doubt, wish to receive a Russian citizenship because of  
47 the economic and safety benefits, and the wish not to have to spend time registering and worrying  
48 about the monthly changes to migration legislation (see also Ruget and Usmanalieva, 2010).  
49 However, all interviews contemplating this said that they could not feel as citizens as they are not  
50 welcomed at all into Russian society.  
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### **The idea of the Russian nation. But where are immigrants?**

In 2012 Russia launched its Migration 2025 Concept (President of Russia, 2012), which, accepting that inwards labour migration was crucial to the country's economic development, aimed at increasing the integration of migrants into Russian society. However, this was stymied, as discussed above, by the Moscow Mayoral elections of the same year, which descended into a race to the bottom to demonize migrants. In general, the promotion of Russian ethno-nationalism became systematic since the time of Putin's re-election in 2012 and impact on discourses towards Islam and migrants in mass-media (Tolz 2017). Furthermore, the opportunity for post-colonial exploitation of labour from abroad superseded any desire for cultural integration, in other words, exploitation was preferred to assimilation. Recently the Ministry for Internal Affairs launched a project of a new Concept for Migration policy for 2018-2025, which not only aim to move migration flows to abandoned Far East regions, but makes the Ministry responsible for the integration of migrants as well (Khamraev, 2017). With the previous Concept petering out it was superseded by state-led attempts to (re)create the 'Russian Nation' through the Federal Program for 'The Strengthening of Russian Nation unity and ethnocultural development of ethnic groups in Russia (2014 - 2020 years) (RIA Novosti 2016). Pointedly, the term 'migrant' appears just a few times in the documents, and only in the opening sections. It also pointed out that the 'insufficiency of measures to provide effective and cultural integration and adaptation of migrants' (The Russian Government 2013, p. 5). The total budget for 2014-2020 is 3761,85 million Rubles (about 60 million USD dollars) and includes many cultural and academic events. Schemes to help assist the integration of migrants and, perhaps more importantly, providing advocacy for the numerous problems they face are conspicuous in their absence, and there are no lines in the budget for such support. Russia does not have a special legal act, which could be specifically directed to combat race and ethnic discrimination as exists in other countries, for example the Affirmative Action in the USA or the Race Relations Act and Equality Act in the United Kingdom. Although the Russian Constitution and many legal acts underline the principle of equality of everybody the lived reality is clearly very different. As Akturk argues that the patterns of migration reinforce a nation-building project in Russia in 21st century, and since 1997 moves away from a multiethnic model and towards an assimilationist melting pot model (2017).

The ability of NGOs in defend migrants' rights is currently at a very low level. This is partly because of the 'foreign agents' law which causing many problems for organizations who receive grants from abroad, many groups have had to close in response to this. Furthermore, the capabilities

are hindered because of the huge difficulties in advocating the interests of migrants in the face of constantly changing policy and legislation. Leaders of NGOs still operating said in the interview that the main problem they face is the sheer scale of the problems migrants face. One prominent human rights activist discussed how they only had the resources to help in only the most serious cases, for example, where migrants had been clearly falsely accused of murder or where newborn children had been taken from their mother while still in a hospital. Valentina Chupic, a lawyer at the NGO Tong Jahoni has, for example, several thousand cases to support immigrants. As she said in a conversation with one of the author, and as discussed above, many cases are processed by the courts without reference to any legal representative the migrant might have. Beyond these organizations, there are so-called Houses of People's Friendship with societies of ethnic minorities but they mostly deal with cultural and language questions, and because they receive support from the state they do not contradict with a ruling policy or courts. Perhaps surprisingly the research found that formal diaspora groups offer little support for migrants facing difficulties, agreeing with Berg-Nordlie and Tkach's (2016, p. 198) arguments that "connections between the state and diaspora organizations, such network governance structures remain just a supplement to what is essentially a vertical decision-making process." According to our observations diaspora organizations very often tend to avoid anything that can cause disagreements with state authorities and therefore put their support, which often includes offices, financing language classes, and cultural activities, at risk. When the lead author was conducting research in Sochi during the Paralympic games in 2014, the chief of one ethnic diaspora, which includes migrants from one former USSR republic, did not mention about any problems regarding the exploitation and discrimination of migrants during the construction of buildings for sport mega-events and described ethnic relations as very peaceful. However, at the same time, the representative of the Memorial NGO had more than one thousand appeals regarding multiple rights abuse including non-paid work, the stealing of documents, unfair detention, amongst other offenses during the preparation of the games.

Even before the transferring functions of the Federal Migration Service to the Ministry of Internal Affairs, analysts said "courts became one of the chains of realization of migration policy which focus on the regulation of a number of foreign citizens" (Troitsky, 2016, p. 51). This change obviously will bring an even deeper turn of migration policy towards police control rather than social integration. The lack of mechanisms for the realization of the rule of equality of rights of migrants, regardless ethnic and race is not the new one. Schenk (2013) calls it a "manual control on immigration" when discussing how the Kremlin stabilized the quota system at a level that would ensure the loyalty and compliance of regional political and economic actors by providing low

quotas, and also Putin's involvement in the closure Cherkizovskii market in Moscow in 2009. This dependence of politics regarding immigration from the President from one side and the weakness of mechanisms of public control on the implementation of both Strategies of National Politics and Migration Concept create ambiguity and uncertainty regarding the future of conditions for migrants in Russia.

## Conclusions

The above discussions demonstrate that experiencing racism is part of everyday life for migrants living in Russia. Whether this is in interactions with the state, fear of persecution on the street by the police or in the workplace, it is a constant factor. The paper argues that a fundamental cause of these attitudes is the post-colonial relationships Russia has with other former members of the USSR. Firstly, immigration to Russia is still on one of the outcomes of the Soviet Union's collapse. The economic condition of many of the former states, in relation to Russia, means that push factors will continue for a long time to come. Drawing upon the work on Mbeme the paper argument that this economic dependence enables the Russian state, and enterprises, to abuse migrant workers at will. At a state level the sending countries have little power with which to confront Russia over the abuses. They are dependent on the remittances that are sent back and the subsidies they receive from Russia. Thus the migrant is seen as a unit from which informal payments can be constantly requested. Within this framework employers can act with impunity, be it through paying lower wages, not providing any training or safety in the workplace and no job security is offered. To further enable this the subservient media portrays migrants, especially those from Central Asia, as criminals, diseased and a threat to Russia's society and security. Bessudnov (2014) writes about the ethnical preferences regarding attitudes towards migrants among Russian population and finds out that Russian citizens better think about Ukrainians and Moldavians (before the Ukrainian conflict) rather than about people from Central Asia and Caucasus. From one side it again shows the presence of racism and prejudices towards people with a different skin colour plus post-colonial and post-imperial imaginations, but from another side, it does not explain the permanent pressure which foreign workers from different countries experience living in Russia.

It can be argued that Russia needs these negative attitudes towards all migrants to deflect attention from the socio-economic problems the country is facing. Many of the problems migrants face such as coping with the informal economy, decreased health care access, a lack of social security and weakened civil society are faced by the general population, albeit at a lower level. Therefore, blaming 'the migrant' for acting informally, draining the country's health care resources and for

posing a security risk (which can be used as an excuse for a clampdown on civil society) provides a much-needed scapegoat for the state. Again drawing upon Mbembe the post-colonial idea of 'to let die' is pertinent here. Migrants are placed outside of state/society structures (health care, education, social support etc) and there is little interest from the state/economy as to whether the migrants live or die. Migrants are forced into a condition of precarity, in which they face constant pressures, whether it be the lack of income, walking down the street in fear of the police or the separation from family and/or home. There is no cause for optimism that the situation will improve. Russia's economic situation is, at best, precarious and thus the exploitation of cheap labour will continue well into the future. The transferring of migration management to the Ministry of Internal Affairs will not see the introduction of progressive, equitable, migration laws and the continued persecution of NGO groups will further reduce the capacity of civil society to provide support for migrants. As with many other sectors of Russian society fundamentally there is no pressure for change as the system currently works for those with power, be it people receiving informal payments from migrants to employers who can pay them half of that of other workers. With Russia's political-economic system based on a power vertical model, it is extremely difficult to see where change would come from. Therefore, migrants will be condemned to live and work under extremely stressful conditions into the future.

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### Notes

1. The interview was taken before the new regulation for employment for Kyrgyz migrants who do not need to pass a language test anymore was introduced in 2016.
2. "Jekspertnoe zakljuchenie na proekt Federal'nogo zakona 'O vnesenii izmenenij v otdel'nye zakonodatel'nye akty Rossijskoj Federacii' (v chasti porjadka polucheniya patentov trudovymi migrantami)" (2015) [Expertise on bill of Federal Law "About amendments in some legislation of Russian Federation (rules of patents' receiving)], *Presidential Board of Russian Federation*, August 18, Available at: <http://president-sovet.ru/documents/read/383/> (accessed 5 December 2015).
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