

# The Transition from Immigration Restriction to the Importation of Labor: Recent Migration Patterns and Chinese Migrants in Russia

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## Abstract

In the 1990s, soon after the collapse of the Soviet Union, Russia faced the same demographic and economic challenges as most countries of Western Europe, such as declining fertility, an aging population and a structural demand for migrant labor. The influx of ethnic Russians from the post-Soviet successor states to their historical homeland was unable to satisfy the growing demand for labor. The present study attempts to examine increasingly diversified migration patterns in the post-Soviet space with a focus on new migration flows from the People's Republic of China to Russia. At the present time the PRC along with countries of the Commonwealth of Independent States (CIS) remains on the top of the list of countries, exporting labor force into Russia. Chinese migrants, as the one of the few available sources of labor, will continue to be an important factor in the development of certain regions of Russia and may fill many key niches in various industrial sectors in the near future. Although there is no consensus among Russia's political elite over the process of Russia's transition into a labor-importing country, an increasing number of Russian politicians and scholars have been calling for an immediate shift from restrictions on immigration to making efforts toward attracting foreign labor.

## 1. Introduction

The second half of the past century witnessed a transition in most Western European states from the policy of encouraging emigration towards a gradual shift to the admission of foreign labor. The postwar agreements between France, Germany and Great Britain on the one hand and several countries of North Africa and the Middle East proclaimed the beginning of the large-scale labor import era. Migrant workers were expected to fill labor shortages related to the steady decrease in the working-age population of most developed countries.

Soon after the collapse of the Soviet Union in 1991, Russia faced the same demographic and economic challenges as most countries in Western Europe, such as declining fertility, an aging population and a structural demand for migrant labor. Although some facets of the transformation in ethnic composition and in migration processes in the republics of the former Soviet Union have received attention from sociologists both inside and outside Russia (Kolstoe 1995; Kosmarskaya 2004; Münz&Ohliger 2003; Otsu 2005; Panarin 1999), there has been little research done on Russia's

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transition to a policy of foreign-labor admission in the new millennium. Moreover, there have been no studies in English or Japanese on the recent discourse on the labor import issue occurring all over Russia and across the country's political spectrum. The present paper draws from Russian-language and other sources to fill this lacuna by examining increasingly diversified migration patterns and the role of Chinese migrants in Russia within the broader context of new migration flows in Russia.

## **2. Demographic trends in Russia**

According to the U.N. Population Division, Russia, with a population of 146 million people, ranks among the top five countries with the least population growth projected for 2000 to 2005, and it has the highest percentage population decline projected from 2000 to 2050. Over the next half century, Russia's population is expected to fall by 42 percent to about 80 million.

The world's largest state by territory, its population started to decrease in 1992. However, until recently this process has not significantly affected the size of the working-age population. On the contrary, despite the general negative trend, the working-age population has been steadily increasing due to a maintained balance between generations reaching and exceeding working age. However, this increase was to be reversed in 2006. The decline of the working-age population will still be insignificant, estimated at 300,000 in the following year, but it is presumed to double in 2008, and will exceed one million a year between 2010 and 2018. By 2026, the overall population decline will amount to 18 million people, which comprises nearly 27 percent of the working population. (*Naselenie Rossii* 2004, Zaionchkovskaia 2005). Naturally this trend will inevitably have catastrophic consequences for the Russian economy and national security.

The maintenance of the working-age population at the same level has been receiving increasing attention from Russian and foreign media and has become one of the government's major concerns. The Russian government would have to make a supreme effort to maintain the working-age population at the present level. The policy, announced in December 2006, of providing 250,000-roubles (about 9,000 US dollars) subsidies for the second child in each family (Federal Law 2006) is ostensibly one of the government's measures to raise the birth rate. However, while this new regulation may have a long-term effect on population growth, importing labor certainly remains one of the most effective ways to counterbalance the present natural population decrease.

## **3. Increasing diversity of migration flows in Russia after 1991**

The change in the geopolitical status of Russia, and the democratization of life in the conditions of the economic and political crises of the 1990s have resulted in a great diversification in the migration patterns in and out of Russia. Since the collapse of the Soviet Union, Russia's society has been

profoundly reshaped by emigration and immigration.

### **3.1 Emigration**

With the onset of political reforms in the Soviet Union, strict controls on population mobility were relaxed significantly. Since ideological barriers had disappeared and administrative barriers had ceased to significantly restrict the international mobility of Russians in the late 1980s — early 1990s, large numbers of young professionals left the country. The annual emigration rate was 105,000 people in 1990 – 1995 and 82,000 people in 1996 – 2000. In the first three years of the new millennium, 160,000 (or 53,000 people annually) left Russia, while only 7,400 re-entered the country every year. The most popular destinations for Russian emigrants were Germany (72,800 in 1995, 47,900 in 1999, 36,900 in 2003), Israel (12,700 in 1995, 20,000 in 1999, 5,300 in 2003), the United States (9,000 in 1995, 5,900 in 1999, 5,300 in 2003), Greece (1,100 in 1995) and Canada (1,100 in 1999). As the statistics show, the emigration from Russia to North America, Europe and Israel significantly decreased only after the economic situation improved. In total, 1.24 million people left Russia for countries other than the CIS from the beginning of democratization in Russia in 1989 until 2003 (Rybakovskii 2005). Consequently, the Russian labor market lost hundreds of thousands of highly skilled and mobile workers who could contribute significantly to Russian economic growth.

This decrease in population was soon substituted by a large influx of ethnic Russians and other migrants from the CIS and immigration, amounting to nearly 100,000 people, from countries other than the CIS.

### **3.2 Repatriation and the government's attitudes**

Migratory movements in the post-Soviet space have involved several elements. There were 25 million ethnic Russians living outside the Russian Federation in the Soviet era, who “became a diaspora population overnight” (Heleniak 2003: 132). Their return to their historical homeland is comparable to the return of expatriates to European countries as a result of decolonization. However, the proximity to Russia and comparative ease of travel has given Russians much easier access to their homeland than was had by most Europeans returning from colonies. Moreover, rising prejudices against Russians, mismanaged privatization and the occupation of almost all civil service jobs by representatives of ethnic majorities in Transcaucasia and Central Asia has provoked high rates of migration to their motherland. These “return” migrants or repatriates, as Anne de Tinguy depicts them (Tinguy 2003: 112–128) represent the movement of the members of their diaspora into its historical nucleus and symbolize the strengthening of bonds connecting overseas Russians and the Russian state.

The mass exodus of Russians from the Transcaucasian region and Central Asia, peaked during the region's period of greatest instability (including armed conflicts), and continued on a smaller scale of

180,000 people a year in the late 1990s, even after the outbreak of the First Chechen war in 1996 and the financial crisis of 1998 (Rybakovskii 2005). According to the last Soviet census conducted in 1989, there were 392,000 ethnic Russians in Azerbaijan and 52,000 in Armenia. In 2006, the number of ethnic Russians in those countries reportedly stood at just 142,000 and 12,000 — only 1.8 percent and 0.4 percent of the total population, respectively. Results of a 2002 population census published in 2003 show that Georgia — the most ethnically diverse of the three South Caucasus nations — had only 75,000 ethnic Russians left, compared with 350,000 in 1989 (Peuch 2003). This exodus to their historical motherland has significantly contributed to the restoration of working-age population numbers. As a result of their return to Russia, the total number of ethnic Russians living in the country, which could have fallen by seven million, only fell by four million (Rybakovskii 2005).

This sudden movement of over three million ethnic Russians in 1989 – 2003 to their historical homeland was in general neither regulated nor particularly encouraged; the Russian government was caught unprepared in the turbulent years following the collapse of the Soviet Union. Over the 1990s, the experiences of expatriates returning to Russia were primarily negative. They received little support from either the Russian government or local communities. It would be not an exaggeration to suggest that, without any peer network support, they were foreigners in their own land and that they received very little acknowledgement of their value for Russia's economic future.

The Russian government's attitude has changed only recently. In 2005, as Alexander Blokhin, the Nationality Affairs Minister appealed to Russia-born citizens living in the former republics of the Soviet Union "to return home". June 2006 was notable for the Presidential Ordinance no. 637 entitled "The National Program to Provide Support to the Voluntarily Movement of Compatriots Living Abroad into the Russian Federation". Twenty-million Russian diaspora members residing in the Soviet successor states were invited to leave their host countries for Russia, with citizenship much easier than before to acquire on their return. This late appeal was made in a time when, according to the recent research, most ethnic Russians living in the CIS had already made their choice between returning to Russia or remaining in the former republics of the Soviet Union. Half a million ethnic Russians living in Central Asia will not likely return to Russia. A number of surveys conducted in Kazakhstan, where the most numerous Russian diaspora resides, show that only about 20% of the ethnic Russians (one million) may leave this state by 2011 (Rybakovskii 2005). As mentioned above, most ethnic Russians have already left the Transcaucasian region and those who remain do not exceed 100,000 people. Comparatively high living standards in the Baltic states make ethnic Russians reluctant to leave their host countries for Russia. Ukraine perhaps remains the only part of the former Soviet Union that possesses a great number of potential repatriates and migrants. 360,000 people moved to Russia from this post-Soviet state in 1990–2002 and one to one and a half million people stay in Russia as labor migrants. However, Ukrainians, including those of Russian origin, increasingly attempt to secure jobs in Eastern Europe, the Mediterranean, Israel and Germany, and no more than

400,000 people are expected to move to Russia in the next decade. Therefore, the net-migration of Russians from the CIS and the Baltic Sea states would barely exceed two and a half million people, and in combination with movement of other ethnic Russians would comprise no more than 350,000–400,000 people a year. Since the number of migrants required to maintain Russian economic growth is estimated at 500,000 – 600,000 people annually, there remains an annual deficit of 150,000 – 200,000 people.

### 3.3 Labor import dilemma

Permanent labor shortages and a robust demand for immigrant labor in the burgeoning construction sector (and some other sectors of the economy) have accelerated the movement of non-Russian migrants from the CIS or, as it is called in Russia, *novoe zarubezh'e* (“new foreign countries”), and migrants from outside the CIS or *staroe zarubezh'e* (“old foreign countries”). Although, there is great difficulty in obtaining reliable data, it could be roughly estimated that approximately 10 million foreign laborers were working in Russia in 2006.

Timothy Heleniak, in his chapter on migration and the changing nationality composition of the Soviet successor states, argues that “placing post-Soviet migration in the context of conventional migration theory is problematic” because of “the complexity of migration processes under way in the Soviet successor states” (Heleniak 2003: 131). Undoubtedly, the break-up of a large multiethnic state would inevitably lead to intensification of migratory processes within its borders and in the region in general. However, these processes can be still analyzed in the classic push-pull framework once economic, cultural and demographic characteristics of each of the successor states are taken into account. Russia, as the largest part of the former Soviet Union, rich in natural resources with low fertility and with the same demographic structure as most European countries naturally will become a major destination for migrants from Central Asian states, where the high birth rate and consequent rapid population growth in combination with high unemployment rate serve as strong push factors.

The CIS remains so far the primary source for the importation of labor force into Russia. Considering the remaining strong historical and logistical links, Russia has been the primary destination for migrants from the poorest former Soviet states of Tajikistan, Kyrgyzstan and some other parts of the CIS. According to the International Organization for Migration (IOM), more than 600,000 Tajik citizens a year seasonally migrate abroad for work, mostly to Russia (IRIN Asia 2005). The real figures might be higher. It is estimated about a million Tajiks travel to Russia each year in search of employment — almost half of Tajikistan’s workforce. Such work is in fact a vital source of income for a large number of impoverished Tajik families, whose average income is less than a dollar a month (Davis 2002). Thus, labor migration from the CIS states has developed its own dynamic, spurred by economic necessity.

The passport registration system (*propiska*), a hallmark of the Soviet-era command economy, has

long been a state institution that greatly affected the mobility of labor migrants within Russia. Passport registration has been particularly strict in Moscow where the city government has tried to restrict the entry of migrants from other parts of Russia, countries of the CIS and “old foreign countries”. Only those who have obtained a job in Moscow are eligible to register, which is required to be done in three days. Yet it is virtually impossible to obtain employment without registration. It is almost impossible to break this vicious circle, which is why many try to reside without registration or pay for forged invitations. District militia (police) officers continue to control registration, and therefore urban residence and entitlements remain under state control. Nevertheless, Russian governmental agencies have attempted to ease the registration procedure for foreign migrants. According to the Federal law “Regarding the Registration of Foreign Citizens and Individuals without Citizenship in the Russian Federation”, adopted by Russia’s parliament, the State Duma, in June 2006, decreed that registration is no longer obligatory and foreign citizens are required only to inform local Russian authorities about their place of residence.

There have also been several efforts made on the regional and governmental level. The need for labor has spurred Russia’ governmental employment agency Roskontrakt to assist Russian enterprises in concluding agreements with various Tajik regions in order to attract Tajik laborers to agricultural enterprises in Smolensk, Kaluga, Vologda, Tula and other regions in central Russia (ITAR-TASS 2004). The State Duma adopted a law aimed at improving the living and working conditions of labor migrants from Tajikistan and Kyrgyzstan in December 2005. The adoption of this law could be viewed as a turning-point in protecting the rights of foreign workers in Russia, while Russian authorities have praised the new law for better registration control. Although few tangible results are yet noticeable since the first implementation of the law, the movement towards the protection of migrants’ rights creates the potential for building a fully democratic society in Russia and eventually reduces the involvement of foreign citizens in illegal activities.

Moreover, against the background of globalization, Russia was reopened for migration from the outside of the Commonwealth of Independent States (CIS), mostly from China, Vietnam and Turkey. Differentials in earnings between Russia and those countries, and structural requirements in the Russian economy resulted in sustained migration from these countries to Russia’s labor market.

Migration from the outside of the CIS (or “old foreign countries”) remains lower than the influx of economic migrants from post-Soviet successor states. Russian sociologists believe that this flow, especially the immigration of potential permanent residents, must be encouraged, but regulated carefully. Thus, a group of scholars, including Olga Vorobieva, Evgenii Gontmakher, Zhanna Zaionchkovskaia, and Leonid Rybakovskii is calling to diversify the ethnic composition of immigrants from outside the CIS by attracting them not only from China, but also from Korea, Vietnam, the Philippines, India and a few other countries, and directing them to various regions of Russia, not exclusively to the Russian Far East, the main site of Chinese immigration. According to this group of

sociologists, however, “populating the 4,500-kilometer zone along the Sino-Russian border must be one of the top-priorities of Russia’s immigration policy that should meet national interests of both Russia and China, and would allow both countries to exploit Siberian mineral resources effectively (Vorobieva and others 2005). The growing understanding of the necessity of an increased reliance on foreign labor is a recent trend in Russia’s policy on labor distribution. However, a growing number of academics, journalists and politicians view the admission of foreign workers, including those from the outside the CIS, as the only possible way to meet the needs of the labor market. The terms of their employment and their potential integration into Russian society has not yet been discussed widely, and this aspect of importing labor may pose a serious threat to the whole process of admission of foreign workers. There is still debate over whether these new migrants, most of whom are unskilled workers, could contribute to the establishment of a credible and stable labor force. Additionally, while most workers from the CIS speak Russian and had received compulsory education according to the same standards as the Russians in the time when the CIS states had been still the single country, workers from “old foreign countries” have strikingly different cultural backgrounds and almost certainly cannot speak Russian. It is doubtful that their integration will be without significant problems both initially and subsequently, and it is likely that the various cultural practices of migrant communities — such as language, eating habits and marriage taboos — will create boundaries separating these communities from the host society. Therefore, Russian authorities may face various problems related to immigrants’ cross-cultural and language education and their integration into Russian society.

The People’s Republic of China as the most proximate Russian neighbor among the potential labor-export states mentioned above had a long period in history of sending its citizens to the eastern part of Russia in the second half of the 19<sup>th</sup> — early 20<sup>th</sup> century. Even though the framework of the present paper does not include a detailed overview of the history of Chinese migration to Russia in the previous periods, it is essential to discuss the recent trends in Chinese migration, and its potential and its place in the admission of foreign workers to the Russian Federation.

#### **4. The Chinese migrants and the host society’s attitude**

Chinese migrants occupy a special place in Russia’s foreign labor admission policy and in the public debate. The period when the region heavily relied on the Chinese labor at the beginning of the twentieth century is well remembered in the Russian Far East<sup>1</sup> and it is commonly expected that with the declining Russian population, the region may soon face an influx of northeast China’s surplus population looking for opportunities to build a new life outside of that overpopulated area. Through increased (and partly media-driven) public anxiety at the growing Chinese presence in the region, the Russian government and public attitudes towards Chinese migrants have been transformed

significantly within a comparatively short fifteen-year period of 1990–2005.

The first phase of labor import from China was comparatively peaceful and successful. As is quite common in history of population movements, Chinese migration to the Soviet Union commenced with a number of governmental agreements, under which the first Chinese guest workers entered the country. Since 1986, the year following the beginning of political reforms in the USSR, parties of 20,000 Chinese contract workers arrived in the Soviet Union every year. Heilongjiang Province alone sent 12,000 laborers in 1989 and 14,500 in 1992. In total, over 70,000 Chinese entered Russia under these agreements from 1988 to 1993 and were employed by 154 factories and companies, most of which were located along the Sino-Russian border. While the country still had a strict policy towards admitting foreigners and virtually prohibited Russians to leave the country, labor shortages in certain parts of Russia required the government to ignore these principles.

Soon after the collapse of the USSR, the Russian Federation resumed the admission of Chinese workers. In 1992, the PRC and the Russian Federation signed a new agreement on the employment of Chinese citizens in Russia. This was paralleled by the Presidential Ordinance of 16 December 1993 at the national level, and the Governor's Ordinance no. 75 "The Regulations of the Employment of Foreign Workforce in the Enterprises of Primorskii Krai" of 1992 at the local level.

The tide of unskilled workers swelled in the mid-1990s, when the Russian economy showed the first signs of recovery since the collapse of the socialist economic system. Apparent Chinese eagerness to work for relatively low wages has been central to their increasing numbers. Moreover, the Trans-Siberian railroad and other inexpensive means of transportation, along with dynamically developing new means of communication have significantly shortened the distances between the PRC and Russia as sending and receiving countries, allowing both legal and clandestine immigrants to avoid comparatively higher-priced air transportation. In 1992, approximately 6,000 Chinese were hired at factories and plants in Primorskii Krai. Within the first four months of 1993, the Federal Migration Service issued employment permits for 251 Russian enterprises, allowing them to welcome approximately 15,000 Chinese, among whom 8,500 were in the Far East, 4,000 in Siberia, and 2,500 in the Urals and the European part of Russia (Larin V.L. 1998: 108–109). As this distribution within Russia attests, the Far East remained their favored destination.

These first governmental and semi-governmental projects were soon followed by the spontaneous migration of shuttle traders and unskilled laborers, who quickly became one of the main categories of Chinese migrants. Despite rumors of extraordinary mass movement from the PRC to Russia and a large number of newspaper and magazine articles warning about the "millions" of illegal migrants, the real number of Chinese migrants in Russia has fluctuated from approximately 200,000 to 450,000 (Gelbras 2004: 31; Vitkovskaia 1999; Larin V.L. 2004: 109) Market forces are exerting a strong "pull" for Chinese to migrate to Russia's large cities. Moscow, where the number of Chinese residents is estimated at between 40,000 (migrants' own estimations) to 250,000 (Kol'chik 2001), as



well as Far Eastern cities attract the largest numbers of migrants. At the same time, it is almost impossible to estimate the number of Chinese in such border cities as Blagoveshchensk, as their number changes every day due to the proximity to their homeland.

These Chinese migrants have successfully established new ethnic niches through engagement in small-scale trade, catering and various unskilled occupations in Eastern Siberia and the Far East, in Moscow and other large cities in European Russia. As a survey conducted by Russian scholars attests, roughly one quarter of Chinese in both European Russia and the Far East are self-employed (Gelbras 2004: 110). Others occupied niches in several other labor market segments, in particular in the construction industry.

It should be noted that Chinese small businesses success lies in their incorporation into the main market. As the low purchasing power of Russians in the 1990s turned them to low-priced Chinese goods, Chinese-dominated markets mushroomed in major cities like Moscow, St. Petersburg, Vladivostok, Khabarovsk, Blagoveshchensk. Moreover, Chinese small-scale enterprises have created jobs for locals and their services are oriented mostly, but not exclusively, to Russian customers. (Of course, some inexpensive Chinese fast-food outlets and other enterprises, similar to those in the nineteenth century, cater to Chinese customers.) Chinese ethnic businesses supply migrants with food, reading matter, and other goods from China. It is indeed true that many Chinese businessmen collaborate intensively with other members of their ethnic group and frequently hire Chinese newcomers, in part taking advantage of their poor knowledge of Russian and their lack of experience of Russian society. However this does not mean that they are completely cut off from the host society. The Chinese ethnic economy is thus not so completely separated from the Russian mainstream economy.

Even the nature of Chinese migration to Russia has been completely transformed. In the early 1990s, as a century and a half previously, the first Chinese shuttle traders were met reasonably well, compared with other non-Russian entrepreneurs, in particular those from the former Soviet Union republics of Caucasus (Armenia, Azerbaijan, Georgia), who had constantly been an object of hostilities since the Soviet era because of their perceived high rate of criminality. An escalation of mass anti-Chinese feelings has not been seen. Many Russians are now accustomed to the presence of Chinese hawkers and small traders, and the attitudes towards Chinese vary from person to person, greatly depending on the location. While a Chinese presence is a matter of concern in areas close to the Chinese border, locals in large cities in European Russia are apparently still not overly concerned about their presence.

During the fifteen years since the collapse of the Soviet Union, as the overall number of registered Chinese migrants in Russia remains insignificant, the Federal Migration Service has not elaborated any specific policy towards them, and only local politicians in areas such as Primorskii Krai or Amurskaia Oblast' in the Far East frequently raise the issue of illegal migrants from the PRC,

particularly during electoral campaigns. Consequently, the entrance and continued presence of Chinese migrants has been unstructured and unregulated.

In the early 1990s these expanding migratory processes led to the creation of migrant networks between origin and destination areas, reducing the economic and social costs of migration. These networks provide newcomers with inexpensive means of transportation and housing, and facilitate necessary psychological and emotional adjustments to a new socio-cultural environment. Many migrants report being tempted to work in Russia by advertisements in Chinese newspapers that offer highly paid work and good conditions. Often they pay large sums for the promise of transport and work. In the early 1990s, it was also common to see Chinese-language posters on the platforms of large railway stations in Moscow, St. Petersburg and other large cities, advertising inexpensive lodging in college dormitories and rented apartments. At these lodgings, migrants would meet other Chinese who would provide them with work and a means to start their own enterprises, or they would wait their turn to depart for North America or Europe.

Chinese hostels can be found in various places, and several are in the Northeast of Moscow. According to a questionnaire administered by a group of Russian sociologists in 1999, most Chinese lived either in hostels run by Russian or Chinese companies (that rented them from Russians, these are typically floors in former dormitories), hotels (similarly either Russian-run or rented by Chinese), or student dormitories. The passport registration system, as mentioned above, as an institutional factor works to the disadvantage of Chinese, often preventing them from unlimited residence in crowded hostels and dormitories (Gelbras 1999b).

These guest workers' lodgings sometimes became a source of a conflict with the local population, as local residents often expressed great concerns about sanitary conditions and the security situation in Chinese workers' neighborhoods. Still, these tensions rarely led to acts of violence. The number of Chinese-populated hotels, hostels and dormitories has steadily increased, not only in areas along the border and the greatest urban areas like Moscow, but also in smaller cities in the central European part of Russia such as Nizhny Novgorod, Voronezh and Tula. Chinese markets mushroomed in many cities along the Sino-Russian border, and were soon followed by inexpensive Chinese fast-food outlets and other enterprises, some of which catered mostly to Chinese customers.

These small centers of Chinese presence have not yet developed into large ethnic enclaves in post-Soviet Russia. However, the possible formation of ethnic enclaves as the next qualitative stage of Chinese ethnic community structurization has caused brisk debates in the Russian society. The projected construction of large business and shopping centers in Moscow and St. Petersburg with investment by Chinese giant companies may lead to the appearance of areas of concentrated residence for the first time since the 1920s, when pre-revolutionary Chinese quarters in Vladivostok and other Far Eastern cities ceased to exist. The idea of building a large-scale "Chinatown" in St. Petersburg was discussed first in the mid-1990s and cropped up again in 2004 when a number of very large

Chinese companies showed an interest in investing some two billion US dollars in developing 200 hectares in the Krasnosel'skii Raion of the city on the Gulf of Finland shore. The issue immediately caused a discussion in the press. Many local residents living in this future Chinatown's neighborhood express fears that large-scale trade centers managed by Chinese will lead to the creation of ethnic enclaves and to the deterioration of sanitary conditions in this part of the city. Thus, the issue of ethnic enclaves has been intensely discussed since the beginning of Chinese sojourn in Russia, and it is still unclear how much more time it will take for the Chinese ethnic minority in Russia to progress to this new level of structural organization.

These new diverse migration flows have a strong impact on their destination's labor market, inevitably contributing to the reconfiguration of increasingly differentiated local labor markets in Russia, and will lead to greater complexity of ethnic composition in a multiethnic country.

## 6. Current discourse

Migrant presence in certain industries and their movement back and forth across borders between Russia and their home countries have become the subject of intense debate on the extent to which the Russian economy should rely on migrant labor, and on the 'threat' of immigration to Russia's national identity. Several Russian politicians, scholars and journalists argue that the government and particularly the Federal Migration Service should prevent rapid growth in the number of migrants from both the CIS and "the old foreign countries", as it could provoke a xenophobic public backlash.

As mentioned above, unreliable estimates in the number of labor migrants, and Chinese in particular, are frequently repeated by Russian politicians from all parts of the political spectrum. Some officials and scholars have even claimed that new Chinese migration was a "challenge to Russian national security" (Diatlov 1999: 118-120). Moreover, according to the assertions of some Russian scholars, in the near future the rapid increase in the Chinese population on the Chinese side of the Russian-Chinese border, against a background of a dwindling population in the RFE threatens to transform "the Chinese factor" into a political problem: it could result, they argue, in a possible loss of Russia's dominant position in Eastern Siberia and the Far East, and even of the loss of this region from Russian territory. In short, there is a danger to Russian territorial integrity (for example, Gelbras 2000b).

The nature of debate, however, has shifted since the beginning of economic growth from 2000 (boosted of course by oil revenues) when the public engaged in rather emotional debates over the acceptance of foreign manual labor. It is increasingly recognized that migration may well have an integral role in helping to sustain economic growth. Recently, a growing number of Russian scholars and journalists have reconceptualized the role of labor migrants and particularly Chinese workers in

the Russian labor market, realizing for the first time their importance for keeping the Russian economy growing. Although there is no full consensus over the process of the transition of Russia into a labor-importing country, a growing number of recent publications view foreign, including Chinese, labor force as an important factor in the development of Eastern Siberia and the Russian Far East. An increasing number of Russian analysts, journalists and officials acknowledge that both Chinese and (most) laborers from the CIS work in niches experiencing labor shortages, and that migrants do not compete with Russian workers.

Some newspaper articles have even emphasized the role of Chinese labor resources in the context of increasing competition for labor within European and global labor markets. Thus, Sergei Karaganov, chief editor of the journal "Russia in Global Affairs" entitled his article in "Rossiiskaia Gazeta" "The Battle for Immigrants", calling to change Russian immigration policy immediately and seek out workers for the Russian economy (Karaganov 2005). The popular Russian daily "Nezavisimaya Gazeta" published an article entitled "Chinese will save Russia", arguing that Chinese migrants might be a source of augmenting the labor force of the RFE by 10 to 20 percent (Obukhova 2003). As some Russian journalists and scholars point out, "a question of strategic importance is not how to prevent Chinese migration, but how to organize it" (Mukomel' 2004). Indeed, while workers from the PRC might be an important source of augmenting labor force in some areas of Russia, particularly in its eastern part, this process requires careful regulation, and the possible effects of importing labor, such as inter-ethnic tensions and ghettoization of some ethnic groups, must be calculated in advance by governmental agencies and independent research institutions. In this respect, the Federal Migration Service and other agencies could deploy the experiences of their West European colleagues who faced the same problem several decades earlier and who have rich experience in dealing with both legal and illegal immigration. The Russian government will ostensibly have to create a new guest-worker program and not just rely on occasional torrents of workers from various parts of the CIS and Asian countries.

There is also the need to create better alternatives for foreigners to work legally in Russia. One can compare the granting of a limited number of work visas with the several millions of people who come into the country each year looking for work. In 2006, the prospect of an amnesty for people whose positions had not been regularized was raised by the Federal Migration Service for the first time. It was proposed to grant one million illegal migrants permission to remain in Russia. As the first step towards the realization of this project, some 2,000 migrants in Moscow and Moscow Oblast' were granted legal residency. It is too early to evaluate the outcome of this project, but the debate as to whether Russia should follow countries like Spain in granting amnesty is increasingly attracting attention of the government, business and members of the general public.

## 7. Concluding remarks

The PRC remains at the top of the list of countries, in addition to those of the Commonwealth of Independent States (CIS), exporting labor into Russia. Chinese migrants, as the one of the few available sources of labor and inexpensive goods to the Russian market will continue to be an important factor in the development of the Russian Far East and may fill many key niches in various industrial sectors on both sides of the Urals. Moreover, as long as crude oil prices remain high on the world market and rising oil revenues serve as a catalyst to the development of various service industries, Chinese labor will fill certain niches in the construction industry, agriculture, catering and can provide other services to Russian clients. According to one recent piece of research, even in the early 2000s a number of small-scale Chinese entrepreneurs intended to expand their activities in Russia (Larin A.G. 2003: 164).

Currently, Chinese migrants' numbers are still insignificant when compared with those of the native population and with labor migrants from the CIS. However, the picture may change significantly a decade after the signing of the Sino-Russian inter-governmental agreements on the admission of Chinese laborers to work on the development of several one-million-hectare forest sites in the Urals (Newsru.com 2006) and the construction of large Chinese business and shopping centers in Moscow and St. Petersburg. By 2010, Russian society will inevitably face the dilemma of Chinese integration and it is uncertain if this process will be manageable and successful.

Chinese migration to Russia is also a part of the fast-growing importation of labor into the Russian labor market. Recently the Russian government has started to switch from restricting immigration to attracting foreign labor. It is still uncertain if this reliance on massive numbers of foreign temporary workers will have positive impact on the country's labor market. There is also a need to create a governmental agency capable of gathering statistics on foreign residents in Russia and providing reliable data. Their status and their employment should be carefully regulated by Russian legislation. The lack of detailed regulations concerning immigration and the status of foreign residents, along with the failure of both central and local authorities to provide legal and other sorts of assistance to foreign workers and to curb migrants' illegal activities, may lead to further tensions around the issue of migration. These factors may strain the relations between Russians and new migrant communities, as has appeared to be the case with respect to the treatment of ethnic Georgians in Russia. At the time of writing, the tension in Russian-Georgian bilateral relations has seriously affected the position of Georgian communities in Russia and has peaked with the recent expulsion of a large number of Georgian workers from Russia. This latest development may have a strong impact on Russian immigration policy as a whole and requires the serious attention of scholars in the near future. Due to recent signs of a trend of augmenting the scale of labor importation, we can anticipate further expansion of Chinese immigration into Russia.

## Notes

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- 1 Since 1990, hundreds of newspaper and journal articles, as well as academic papers in Russia have attempted to draw a parallel between Chinese immigration to Russia in the late 19<sup>th</sup> — early 20<sup>th</sup> century and the influx of Chinese migrants in the 1990s and 2000s. For example, see Diatlov 1999.

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