

Russia's new migration policy concept – security at the core

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On 15 October, Vladimir Putin approved the State Migration Policy Concept of the Russian Federation for 2026–2030, which outlines an assessment, general objectives, and the main directions of the state's migration policy. The document envisages a further, radical tightening of controls over individuals arriving to Russia from traditional countries of migrant origin, alongside the selective admission of migrants from other regions such as Europe and Africa. According to official data, the number of migrants in Russia currently stands at around 6.2 million, although this figure appears to be overstated. Despite this, labour shortages in the domestic market are currently estimated at approximately two million people. Exact numbers and the dynamics of migration processes are difficult to determine due to the lack of accessible data.

The implementation of the concept will lead to a further decline in immigration levels, reinforcing an existing trend. This will make it more difficult to address some of the country's most pressing challenges, which migration should help to mitigate. These include easing the impact of negative demographic trends and filling the widening gaps in the domestic labour market. The extent to which the document's provisions are implemented will depend on the consistency of the government's approach to migration policy, which it has previously adjusted in response to shifting political needs.

Commentary

- **The further tightening of entry and residency regulations, mostly affecting arrivals from Central Asia and the Caucasus, will discourage migrants from coming to Russia and deepen the existing gaps in the labour market.** Since the terrorist attack in March 2024, which was blamed on migrants from Tajikistan, foreign nationals have faced a growing number of restrictions and requirements. Among other measures, some regions have banned them from working in specific sectors such as transport and retail. These measures have been accompanied by additional bureaucratic requirements and extensive mechanisms for controlling migration, including digital tracking systems, biometric data collection, and a register of individuals under surveillance. As a result, migrants have become particularly vulnerable to abuses of power, notably corruption. The restrictions have been reinforced by a media campaign portraying migrants from Central Asia and the Caucasus as a security threat and normalising violence against them, thereby fuelling xenophobic sentiment in Russian society. These actions have led to tensions between Russia and countries of migrant origin, including Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, and Azerbaijan over the past two years. The negative consequences of the war in Ukraine, such as the deteriorating economic situation in Russia and the risks

associated with the coercive recruitment of migrants for frontline deployment, have exacerbated the situation, further reducing Russia's attractiveness as a destination for migration.

- **The Kremlin's stated need to attract selected groups of foreign nationals largely serves propaganda purposes.** The document primarily targets individuals who identify with so-called Russian traditional spiritual and moral values, compatriots living abroad, and Ukrainian citizens who have left the occupied territories. According to the Russian government, these groups could be easily integrated and pose no security threat. The Concept's assumptions in this regard align with key themes in Russian propaganda, which promotes an image of Russia as a conservative state in terms of values – a portrayal that does not reflect the country's socio-political realities, including low levels of religiosity and high divorce and abortion rates. In August 2024, Putin signed a decree simplifying the relocation process for foreigners who share the traditional values promoted by the Kremlin. The streamlined procedure notably removes the requirement to prove knowledge of the Russian language. In the six months since the regulation came into force, only 480 visas have been issued under this pathway. At the same time, the Concept notes an increase in arrivals from countries subject to Russia's visa regime, which likely includes individuals recruited in places such as Africa, Cuba, and North Korea to meet the needs of Russia's defence industry or to support its war effort. This selective admission of specific migrant groups to Russia is unlikely to generate a large-scale inflow of human capital or replace the inexpensive labour force from Central Asia and the Caucasus, on which the Russian economy continues to rely.
- **Since the annexation of Crimea, Russia has been increasing its population at Ukraine's expense.** The Concept outlines further measures aimed at resettling Ukrainian citizens who have left the four occupied regions for Russian territory. For the government, naturalisation has become the primary means of offsetting the country's shrinking population. In recent years, Ukraine's occupied territories have been the main source of new citizens, with large segments of the population relocated to Russia and subjected to forced passportisation. According to data from the Russian Ministry of Internal Affairs, more than two million Ukrainians have been granted Russian citizenship since 2014, a figure that excludes the passportisation of those remaining in Crimea and the four occupied regions. However, it is unlikely that those who have left the occupied territories would be willing to return to their homes or settle permanently in Russia, as doing so would expose them to the risk of persecution. It is also worth noting that Russia's practice of including Ukrainian citizens in its statistical reporting allows for manipulation, further complicating any objective assessment of the country's migration and demographic situation.