

'Only North Korea Has a Registration System Like Moscow's'

By [Paul Goble](#)

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Window on Eurasia covers current events in Russia and the nations of the former Soviet Union, with a focus on issues of ethnicity and religion. The issues covered are often not those written about on the front pages of newspapers. Instead, the articles in the Windows series focus on those issues that either have not been much discussed or provide an approach to stories that have been. Frequent topics include civil rights, radicalism, Russian Islam, the Russian Orthodox Church, and events in the North Caucasus, among others.

Author **Paul Goble** is a longtime specialist on ethnic and religious questions in Eurasia. Most recently, he was director of research and publications at the Azerbaijan Diplomatic Academy. He has served in various capacities in the U.S. State Department, the Central Intelligence Agency and the International Broadcasting Bureau as well as at the Voice of America and Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty and at the Carnegie Endowment for International Peace. He writes frequently on ethnic and religious issues and has edited five volumes on ethnicity and religion in the former Soviet space.

A group of legal activists is working in the Russian capital to help people moving there comply with the law and work with a government registration system unlike any in the world — except for the one maintained by the regime in North Korea, claims one of the leaders of the "Illegals of Moscow" movement.

In an [interview](#) posted on the [Chaskor.ru](#) portal this week, that individual, speaking on condition of anonymity because of the risk of reprisal from officials, said that Moscow Mayor Yuri Luzhkov's claim that such registration systems exist "in all the major capitals of the world" is simply "a lie."

"There is nothing like [Moscow's system] anywhere in the world," the Illegals of Moscow

leader said. Members of the organization "have specially studied this question, and the last country with such a registration ["propiska"] regime is the Korean People's Democratic Republic" under Kim Jong-Il.

In her introduction to the interview, Burmistrova notes that the web site of the Illegals of Moscow — Nelegal.ru — is the public face of "a virtual civic movement" intended to provide guidance and support to those navigating the difficulties of the Moscow registration system, including lending assistance in making appeals to prosecutors.

But she notes that since its formation in September 1999, the people behind the site have been committed not to violating any laws or helping others to do so. Instead, they "require" that those with whom they work obey all laws and the Russian Constitution, although the name of the site and the composition of the people they help mean that those involved can only speak anonymously.

The site was created a decade ago, the activist said, by a group of "private persons" who had "experienced all 'the charms' of the Moscow registration system: discrimination and humiliation by bureaucrats and the police" when they deal with Muscovites and "the limitation of [their] rights."

Obviously, only a small fraction of those arriving in the city visit the site, although some [8,000 people did so in the last month alone](#). Indeed, the activist said, "the typical portrait of the visitor and member of the virtual community of illegals is a highly educated young specialist."

"Unfortunately," the activist continued, the group is "extremely limited in its resources and is forced to struggle with an enormous machine that transforms arrivals into nutritious food for an enormous inhuman monster" that lives by "bribes" and by "the unconscionable and uncontrolled exploitation of those from outside the city."

So offensive is this processing that "the word 'Muscovite' has become a term of derision, if not a curse." For example, the interviewee said, "the majority of marriages in Moscow are concluded not on the basis of love but for a residence permit. Can this be normal?" the activist asked rhetorically.

Given that, the activist said, the Illegals of Moscow group also sees itself as working to "change the image of Moscow, to convert it from an inhospitable city with eternally hungry police officers and unfriendly people into a free and welcoming place in which it is comfortable and pleasing for all to live."

A major reason why the powers that be are able to get away with their arbitrary behavior is the legal illiteracy of the population. "The people do not know their rights, not only about registration but about any others. No one reads the laws or is interested in his or her rights," the activist said.

Other serious problems are that even when the laws and the constitution are clear, regional officials who don't like them simply ignore them. And given Russia's lack of a precedent

system of justice, everyone who faces the authorities must start from square one against what the authorities say is the law.

Asked what laws the organization would like to see changed, the activist said that it would prefer to see the entire institution of registration or "propiska" eliminated. At present, the situation that exists in Moscow is "surreal" with the authorities wanting information but not wanting to give people registration permits in the absence of bribes or pressure.

The activist, however, held out little hope that the situation in Moscow would change for the better anytime soon. While the Illegals of Moscow group has regularly declared its desire to meet with the authorities, they have been harassed or ignored since Russian "government organs do everything they can to prevent citizens from achieving what is theirs by right."

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