

Searching for a New Strategy On Migration

By [Olga Troitskaya](#)

May 04, 2012

The  Moscow Times

Over the past decade, the Russian government has been making a sustained effort to put immigration under control. But this effort has been effectively undermined by the open-border regime Russia maintains with most of other former Soviet republics.

Since 1991, citizens of the Commonwealth of Independent States countries have been allowed to freely enter Russia and stay for up to three months while searching for a job. In response to growing discontent with the high level of immigration, the authorities have started to limit access of foreigners on the Russian labor market. The introduction of labor quotas for CIS immigrants helped to lower their official number: from 6 million people in 2007 to 4 million in 2009 to 1.7 million in 2011 and 2012. But instead of deterring potential immigrants, this policy has only pushed millions of them into the shadows.

Russia's policy doesn't satisfy those who want to restrict immigration nor those who favor it. Nationalists accuse the government of inability to protect the labor market for Russian

citizens, and they support a visa regime with some CIS countries. The liberals point out that this policy expands the shadow economy and prevents businesses from meeting their need for labor. They advocate abolishing the quota system and giving migrants more legal opportunities to find jobs.

Shortly after nationalist riots rocked Moscow in December 2010, the state began working on a migration policy for 2012–25. This strategy follows neither the nationalist nor the liberal path.

The restrictionist scenario was apparently ruled out from the outset as contradicting the Kremlin's policy of strengthening regional integration around Russia. On Jan. 1, the common economic space for Russia, Belarus and Kazakhstan became effective, and the Kremlin has made it clear that other CIS countries may be welcome to join in the future.

The authors of the proposed migration policy also considered the liberal scenario too risky given the known public attitudes. According to Levada Center polls, only 28 percent of Russians supported liberal immigration policy in 2011, while 64 percent favored restrictions. Lifting quotas and legalizing millions of immigrants from Central Asia and the Caucasus could lead to a surge in nationalist protests that could quickly turn against the authorities.

The absence of political will is likely to remain the main obstacle to a consistent reform of Russia's migration policy. But if the government misses its chance to either restrict illegal immigration or make a clear public case for the need of more migrants, social tensions are set to increase sooner than expected.

Olga Troitskaya is a political analyst specializing in migration issues.

The views expressed in opinion pieces do not necessarily reflect the position of The Moscow Times.

Original url:

<https://www.themoscowtimes.com/2012/05/04/searching-for-a-new-strategy-on-migration-a14570>