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## On labor migration to Russia: Central Asian migrants and migrant families in the matrix of Russia's bordering policies

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## ABSTRACT

Russia is a relatively recent addition to the list of the world's top destination countries for migrants. Following the collapse of the Soviet Union, Russia has seen a number of re-configurations of its relationships with the other former USSR republics. These dynamic de- and rebordering processes have been shaped by Russia's policy-making in the field of migration, as well as changes in the character of migration itself, particularly from Central Asia. In this article, we explore the ways in which migrants from Central Asia are impacted by and negotiate this changing situation. The view of Russian society and the state of these migrants primarily as 'homo laborans'—working subjects—is not only erroneous, but creates a particular imaginary for policy-making which denies certain migrants the right to family life, often forcing family members and children to become undocumented and denying them access to state support and protection.

### Introduction: unveiling family migration to Russia as a problem

In October 2015, Russian media literally exploded with news of the tragic death of a five-month-old infant, Umarali Nazarov. The tragedy happened in Saint Petersburg in a family of migrants from Tajikistan. During a raid on squatted houses where migrants from Central Asia often stay, the Russian Federal Migration Service detained several people for a lack of valid documents authorizing their stay in the territory of the Russian Federation. Among these people was Zarina Iunusova. Together with other detainees Zarina, with an infant in her arms, was brought to the local police station and detained for 5 h until the circumstances were clarified. The baby was taken to one of the children's hospitals of Saint Petersburg. The next day, when the parents finally received information on their baby's whereabouts, they went to the children's hospital where they were notified that the infant had died in the night.

The incident triggered a wave of indignation. Liberal newspapers published articles on human rights, accusing the authorities of implementing a flawed, brutal immigration policy. Pro-patriotic media used this as another opportunity to say, "Oh those bloody foreigners!" and shift the blame onto the family. Besides the press, the debate hit the social networks and blogs and partially spilled out beyond the virtual world: representatives of the Tajik diaspora gathered to protest in front of the Honorary Consulate of Tajikistan in Saint Petersburg; a small rally urging an investigation into the crime took place. However, after a month, the story slowly faded from the public eye. The mother of the

baby, who was staying in Russia illegally, was deported. The body of the infant was transported home to Tajikistan, where it was quietly buried without the further investigation promised by the government of Tajikistan.

Having caused reverberations across Russian society, this tragic event also raised new political and academic questions with regards to family migration to Russia. There had previously been studies of family migration that covered issues of female labor migration (Agadzhanian & Zotova, 2011; Brednikova & Tkach, 2010; Kasymova, 2012; Khushkadamova, 2010; Tiuriukanova, 2011; Zotova, 2007) and children from migrant families (Aleksandrov, Baranova, & Ivaniushina, 2012; Brednikova & Sabirova, 2015; Florinskaia, 2012a, 2012b). However, these studies explored people residing legally in Russian territory facing problems of adaptation and integration. The case of Umarali Nazarov's family highlighted another facet of family migration to Russia: the existence of a boundary between working and non-working family members, and the structural exclusion of the latter from the state's purview and therefore from Russia's legal and social space.

Exclusion is one the central problems in academic and public debates on migration (see, for example, Agamben, 2004; Mbembe, 2003; De Genova, 2015). Considering the case of migrants from Central Asia in Russian cities, Round and Kuznetsova write of 'a citywide state of exception, within which legal frameworks protecting migrants are ignored or misinterpreted to the benefit of the market' (2016, p. 1). In accord with their elaboration, we focus on yet one more aspect of migrants' state of exception that is characteristic of contemporary Russia:

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the conceptual and structural deprivation of migrants, labelled as unskilled laborers, who are deprived of the right to any life in Russia outside of work. Here, we refer to a set of problems that emerge out of the discrepancy between the Russian state's views and the actual life experiences of Central Asian migrants. State policy sees these migrants as cheap labor; a work force coming to Russia to stay temporarily, make some money, and go home. The reality, however, is rather different. As ours and our colleagues' research shows, what start as short-term visits often last for years, with the temporary work stay of a solo migrant gradually (or suddenly) becoming a family project. In regards to citizens from Central Asia coming to Russia for work, the Russian state, however, is not willing to talk the language of family. It is the logic of the labor market which predefines this migration stream, and therefore in order to stay legally in the long term, anyone coming to Russia within this stream is obliged to be officially employed—a condition which is often not possible for all members of a migrant family.

Russia has only recently become one of the largest migrant-receiving countries and is still adapting to this new role. The first part of our article analyses the series of geopolitical and social borderings and reborderings in the course of which Russia has been established as destination country for migrants. However, the main focus of our article is on the lives of migrants themselves. Inspired by the feminist geopolitics that refocuses the gaze 'from the macrosecurity of states to the microsecurity of people and their homes; from the disembodied space of neorealist geopolitics to a field of live human subjects with names, families, and hometowns' (Hyndman, 2007, p. 36), in the main body of the article we consider the effects of Russian state bordering on the life of a labor migrant from Central Asia, giving special attention to family migration as a growing phenomenon overlooked by the state. We consider the quest for legalization of a working migrant as it played out in a highly unstable legal environment, and move to discussing the problems experienced by families in migration.

#### Methodological note

This article originates from our work on two large research projects (see Acknowledgements). In the course of these projects, we analyzed secondary data (articles, documents) on the legal environment shaping migration in Russia. The main sources of primary data were expert and biographical interviews/conversations and observations. We conducted twenty interviews with employees of migration services, social services, and human rights organizations dealing with migrants. The main pool of firsthand information revealing the migrants' position is composed of biographical interviews (about 60) with migrants from Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, and Uzbekistan—the main suppliers of the migrant workforce to modern Russia. Our informants were men and women aged 18 to 50 who had migrated with their families or by themselves and had spent between one and ten years in the state of migration. In the interviews, we discussed the everyday lives of migrants and the problems they encountered during migration. Having developed a special relationship of trust with a number of migrants (15 in total from Tajikistan, Kyrgyzstan, and Uzbekistan), we followed their lives for two years. In terms of methodological perspectives in migration research, we position our work within the domain of transnationalism with its focus on migrant subjectivities formed by multiple attachments that stretch across national borders and contexts. This article focuses on migrants' experiences in Russia and with Russian bordering policies and practices, leaving aside the policies of sending societies as well as the challenges of living transnational lives. However, we realize the crucial importance of these processes for shaping a migrant's life and have explored them in depth elsewhere (Brednikova, 2017).

## Conceptualization: bordering as applied to migration

### *Bordering and migration*

Over the past two decades, the understanding of borders in the social sciences has gone through significant changes and developments (see, for example, Johnson et al., 2011; Newman & Paasi, 1998). Up to the end of the 1980s, borders were viewed mainly as pre-given intact constructions, defining discrete entities, and any debate about borders that did take place focused solely on state borders. However, in the last twenty years this perspective has been challenged by a view of borders as dynamic processes, with the field of analysis expanding to include manifold territorial and social borders at various scales. The research agenda in the social sciences has, as a result, shifted from the border as a stable entity to the policies and practices of social and spatial differentiation, looking at the processes through which borders are made, remade, and unmade (see Brambilla et al., 2015; Johnson et al., 2011; Megoran, 2012). This methodological and epistemological shift was an academic response to the rise of new mobilities: the growing mobility of people and information, intertwined in a complex cause-and-effect relationship with the mobility of borders themselves. In recent decades, along with a series of political reborderings in Europe that resulted in the relocation of state borders in space, all over the world borders have been demonstrating mobility of a different kind, stretching from state border perimeters to inner territories of states and dissipating in society through the activities of police, migration services, and other institutions (Balibar, 2003; Bauder, 2011). With growing securitization of domestic and international politics and the establishment of 'the migration-security nexus' (Faist, 2005), 'migrants and migratory life in general' (Nail, 2012, p. 242) have become the ultimate target of border enforcement, making earlier predictions of a 'borderless world' even more conditional. The tendency of states to reinforce border thinking-and-acting as a mode of governance and as a part of everyday life (Jones & Johnson, 2014; Perkins & Rumford, 2013; Yuval-Davis, Wemyss, & Cassidy, 2017) has evoked considerable reaction—and resistance—from scholars worldwide. The most radical proposals call for revising the global world system, advancing the possibility of open and no borders (Bauder, 2014a), as well as demanding equality and inclusion in political projects of belonging (Yuval-Davis, 2012) and a universal 'right to the world' irrespective of immigration status (Nevins, 2017). This radical criticism elaborating alternative visions to today's increasingly bordered world is articulated by scholars analysing the mechanisms and manifestations of state bordering as it shapes mobility and migration. Still the primary units of world division, nation-states set their own mobility rules, creating categories of migrants, allowing some people in, and rejecting others (Bauder, 2014a, 2014b; Neumayer, 2006). Among the grounds for such 'differential inclusion' (Mezzadra & Neison, 2011, 2013), nationality is the most obvious and essential one. As Neumayer emphasizes, today's 'supposedly unprecedented mobility' remains strictly (b)ordered by international visa regimes implemented for passport holders, which creates highly unequal access to foreign spaces for different categories of people and reinforces existing inequalities (2006, pp. 5–6). Overall, international migration policies demonstrate a wide spectrum of possible criteria for selecting incoming persons, based on citizenship policy in a given country, economic rationality, and/or emotional attitudes towards 'the Other'. Post-World War II migration policies have involved a variety of approaches toward potential migrants: ranking people by the principle of 'cultural proximity' (Riaño & Wastl-Walter, 2006), by common ethnic origin and the *jus sanguinis* inclusion principle, or by personal qualifications such as education, professional experience, age, language knowledge, and professional adaptability (Bauder, Lenard, & Straehle, 2014).

The contemporary border debate looks at borders as dynamic systems subject to constant change. Thus, borders as systems of inequalities producing the ranks of inclusion/exclusion are highly unstable and dynamic, being direct derivatives of states' shifting internal and foreign

policies and the broader international context. International scholarship gives thorough historical accounts of the transformation of state migration policies (see, for instance, [Nevins, 2014](#) on the US), persuasively demonstrating that even countries which seemed to have a fundamental attachment to particular immigration policies are not immune to changes, as, for instance, [Bauder et al. \(2014\)](#) shows for Canada and Germany.

Ongoing international turbulence and tensions—and, for that matter, new alliances and friendships—also affect bordering policies. Depending upon foreign relations, states manipulate their access policies, either opening their borders to other countries' nationals or closing them, and Russia is a telling example of this. Over the last decade, access to the space of the Russian Federation has proven to be in flux, heavily dependent on the quality of mutual relations and the foreign policy climate in general ([Fokht, Shamakina, Miliukova, & Temkin, 2015](#)).

Yet having crossed an external state border and arrived on the territory of another country, a migrant faces barriers of a different kind, shaping their ability to engage in society and the labor market, access to health care, education, and other social services. Migration policy, thus, constitutes a system of bordering policies. The external policies define whether entry to the country is open or closed to various categories of incomers, while the internal policies and practices of bordering formulate the rules and requirements for those who have been allowed in.

#### *Labor migration and homo laborans*

With all the diverse forms of migration and the state's approaches to their classification, labor migration remains a dominant migration stream ([ILO Global Estimates, 2015](#)). For most states, labor migrants occupy a hybrid position. On the one hand, labor migration is viewed as a road to economic recovery and a way to solve demographic problems ([Zaionchkovskaia, 2005, 2006](#)). On the other hand, migration is recognized as a security problem—physical but also cultural and economic. Thus, the state wants migrant labor, acknowledges the necessity and need for it, while separating and dividing migrant work viewed as socially useful from migrants themselves, who arouse suspicion as socially dangerous subjects. As Anderson puts it ([2013, p. 148](#)), 'migrant workers are often lumped in (purposely?) with various "threatening undesirables" such as drug smugglers and terrorists, but migrant labor is an "economic" factor of production as well as a "political factor"—you cannot have one without the other, though political capacities can be denied or reduced. The contradictory unity of "politics/economics" is embodied in the migrant worker, often valued as economically essential but politically rejected'.

Being non-citizens in their country of employment, labor migrants as 'deportable non-citizens' ([De Genova, 2013, p. 1](#)) are also rejected socially. They are 'separated from their families who are forced to stay behind, ...exposed to abuse by their employers [and] denied many of the social and economic rights other workers can take for granted, including the right to stay' ([Bauder, 2014b, pp. 91–92](#)).

Bordering policies towards labor migrants are based upon the perception that labor migration is a temporary phenomenon. In this case, labor contracts, work and residence permits, and other instruments shape the system of bordering which limits the legal stay of a migrant. This is a cost-minimizing strategy for the state, as it allows the state to deny any social responsibilities for a migrant and concerns relating to integration of migrants and their families even when their 'temporary stay' lasts for years or even decades. Thus, temporariness becomes the foundation for a strategy of overlooking migrants' lives and a justification for their political and social non-inclusion ([Vosko, Preston, & Latham, 2014](#)).

The 'minimization' of a migrant to *homo laborans*, a working subject, also frames them as not belonging within the state. The subjectivity of a labor migrant is defined primarily by her/his function as labor; moreover, it is defined as such from both positions: by the state, who creates

the rules allowing labor migration and is ready to accept a labor migrant as a (temporary) working subject only; and the migrant her/himself whose life as a migrant is often reduced to work. The reasons for this self-reduction are undoubtedly structural: their involvement in low skilled and therefore low paid jobs forces migrants to work long hours in order to justify their stay; long working hours and poor living conditions leave little space, time, or energy for any life outside work. The structural conditions in a receiving country are exacerbated by those imposed by the sending society. In case of the societies of Central Asia, 'the burden of ritual life' ([Ikhamov, 2013](#)) and the need to meet traditional social obligations such as financing opulent weddings, are also responsible for the labor 'catch-22' experienced by migrants. These conditions construe the migrant as a single person. Moreover, these conditions do not allow for the presence of a family. The family as an everyday social unit is shrunk both when the family lives in different countries, and when they live together as migrants. The lifestyle of a labor migrant makes it difficult to participate in the family life necessary for social reproduction: time for bringing up children or leisure is generally absent. The state perceives migrants to be singular laboring units and introduces legal obstacles to family reunification. Overall, a migrant in these circumstances is a single *homo laborans*, and all other variations create difficulties for her/him and the state.

#### *Homo laborans in Russia*

Among modern migration studies there is a large amount of work inspired by neo-Marxist critiques, uncovering and exposing systems of inequality and exploitation between the Global North and the Global South, non-residents and indigenous citizens, the global city and everything outside. Being an important actor in the international migration arena, Russia and its migration processes are embedded in these systems of inequality. The condition and problems of migrants in Russia, predefined by Russian structural and cultural contexts, are a much-debated issue in the academic community as well as a target issue of NGOs in Russia and abroad. One of the most contentious works on the subject is a study by [Round and Kuznetsova \(2016\)](#) analyzing the position of migrants in Russian cities through Achille Mbembe's concept of necropolitics (2003). For Mbembe, necropolitics is 'a framework for understanding the actions of the state in relation to migrants through their portrayal as diseased and criminal' ([Round & Kuznetsova, 2016, p. 14](#)). Necropolitics is not just about death, but 'it is more centered around the idea of 'letting die' and injuring almost to the point of death' ([Round & Kuznetsova, 2016, p.14](#)).

As Round and Kuznetsova argue, the state and the majority of employers in Russia see Central Asian migrants 'as a social-economic slave body, both individually and collectively' ([2016, p. 2](#)). Migrants are seen as disposable, deprived of health care, workplace safety, education for family members, or any form of legal protection ([Round & Kuznetsova, 2016](#)). Russian migration policy and practice create structural conditions for migrants' exclusion that lead to the dramatic consequences seen with the family of Umarali Nazarov described above. Our article proffers a multi-scalar analysis in which state policies are analyzed through the experiences of migrants in everyday life. First, we reconstruct the geopolitical bordering of Russia, providing the context for differential inclusion policies and consider the structural exclusion of migrants as a result of state bordering policies. We try to understand how the politics of bordering precondition the migrant's subjectivity as *homo laborans* and shape his/her private and family life.

#### **Becoming an immigration country: geopolitical and social (re) bordering in Russia**

Whereas in contemporary English-language discussion the borders between the US and Mexico and within and at the edges of the European Union have been the most researched sites for border scholars, setting the disciplinary standards, Russia and the post-Soviet space

is by no means a less productive or interesting region in this regard. At present, Russia has become the focus for cutting edge research on borders and bordering for various reasons—not least among which is an increase in migration. According to UN Population Division estimates, as of 2013, the Russian Federation was second only to the United States in terms of numbers of immigrants (Malinkin, 2014). This statistic requires additional exploration, as it reflects a new situation for Russia, which also differs considerably from the situation in the world's other large centers of immigration.

Historically, immigration - as the influx of people from beyond national borders - never played a major role in the general picture of migrations on the territory of contemporary Russia, or, for that matter, its predecessors, the Soviet Union and the Russian Empire. While there was some immigration and substantial emigration from Russia at certain historical moments (Polian, 2005), it was mainly internal migration of all kinds, including the centrifugal migration from Russia as a core of the huge empire 'which was constantly colonizing itself' (Kliuchevskii, 2005, p.15, see also Etkind, 2011) to its peripheries which defined the country's migration story prior to the 1980s (Zaionchkovskaia, 2000). This situation radically changed with the dissolution of the Soviet Union, when rebordering and nationalization processes going on all over post-Soviet space led to thousands of people being on the move. This heralded a new phase in which Russia began to grow as an immigration destination. Since mass migration to Russia began, migration flows have been localized within the boundaries of the post-Soviet world, with Russia as the biggest center of attraction. This reflects the specificities of post-Soviet migration processes. As Russian scholar Vladimir Malakhov notes (2016), it is important to remember that in Russia the 'host' society and those who are now referred to as 'migrants' were, until recently, part of the same political and cultural community. This unity of socio-cultural space and identity makes Russia distinct from other post-colonial/post-imperial contexts where immigrants from former colonies were largely alien to the population of the former metropolitan centers. In the words of Malakhov, '[t]he process that we have been observing in the last quarter of the century is the process of othering of those who, in the memories of generations still living today, were either entirely or partially "ours"' (Malakhov, 2016).

For the quarter of a century that Russia has been an immigration country, we can distinguish two main waves of migration that are remarkably distinct from one another in terms of their character and composition, as well as the accompanying attitude to migration on the part of the state and wider society. Throughout the 1990s, the general migration picture was defined by humanitarian migration to Russia. The most important and numerous trend was the return of ethnic Russians and Russian-speaking citizens, who had moved to national republics in Soviet times and became a status minority in the new states that emerged after the fall of USSR. Besides, the dissolution of the Soviet Union and conflicts in the post-Soviet space produced an influx of refugees and internally displaced persons of non-Russian ethnicity. However, while being an important social issue, migration in the 1990s went rather smoothly for Russian society, especially from today's perspective, in the sense that it was not marked by consistent boundary construction work shaping 'the locals' and 'the newcomers'. It is not that these processes were unproblematic and didn't raise questions pertaining to social distinctions, but the effects of political and social rebordering were so all-encompassing for everyone living through the radical transformation of the system of political and social identities that they united rather than divided. There were multiple effects of rebordering apparent everywhere and experienced by everyone, and multiple situations (re)constructing social boundaries, without a unified and solidified 'us' and 'them'. Some boundaries were more notable than others—for instance the difficulties faced by Russians from the former Soviet republics whose newly discovered cultural Otherness was a surprise for both 'the returnees' and 'the hosts' (e.g. Damberg & Kiseleva, 2001; Kosmarskaia, 2006). Despite these difficulties, the

general framing of the situation as a 'return of the insiders' and not as migration of potentially dangerous 'aliens' helped in accommodating re-migration. As for migration of other ethnic groups, shared Soviet socialization, knowledge of Russian, and experience of life in one social and political entity provided the grounds for integration and effectively removed the issue of problematized social boundaries from the common social agenda.

The beginning of the 2000s brought remarkable changes in the Russian migration picture. With decreasing humanitarian migration, labor migration became the dominant trend. The nationality of incoming persons somewhat widened—including workers from China, North Korea, and Vietnam, who started to come to Russia in more or less significant numbers. However, these new sending countries did not substantially change the general migration composition; post-Soviet countries remain the largest migration donors and suppliers of workforce to Russia (Tscherbakova, 2015). According to the statistics of Russia's Federal Migration Service, as of January 2016, there were 9,881,503 foreign citizens and stateless persons residing in Russia. More than 85% of them, or 8,704,070 people, were nationals of ten countries: nine post-Soviet states and China, the only non-post-Soviet country completing the list (Troitskii, 2016, p. 4). Eight of the nine post-Soviet countries sending migrants to Russia are members of the Commonwealth of Independent States (CIS), which is a political union of post-Soviet countries, while the ninth is Ukraine, an associate member of CIS (and the leading source of migrants to Russia). The major structural condition providing for intensive migration flows over post-Soviet space is a visa-free regime established between CIS countries and Ukraine.

With the change in the character of migration from humanitarian to labor in the beginning to the middle of the 2000s, the general scope of migration and composition of migrant flows also shifted extensively. Central Asia became the major region sending migrants to Russia. Tajikistan, which survived the post-Soviet economic crisis as well as a civil war, was the first country to start supplying migrant workers to Russia as early as the 1990s. Migration from Uzbekistan began somewhat later; however, by the early 2000s the numbers of Tajik and Uzbek migrants in Russia were similar (Zotova, 2008). According to the Central Data Bank on the Registration of Foreign Citizens under the Ministry of Internal Affairs of the Russian Federation, there were 1,923,388 Uzbek migrants and 1,067,247 Tajik migrants living in Russia. These two countries rank second and third correspondingly in the general list of labor migrants in Russia, ranking only below Ukraine (Monitoring, 2017). Kyrgyzstan occupies the fourth position in this list, however the statistics do not take into account Kyrgyzstan nationals who have recently obtained Russian citizenship. As this practice has become available and popular in the last five years, the general number of Kyrgyz migrant workers has increased (Monitoring, 2017, p. 23). In this article, when we refer to 'Central Asian migration' we mean migration from these three countries. Mass migration from this region is shaped primarily by economic trends, such as a high unemployment and extremely low wages in home countries (e.g. Zotova, 2008). There are a significant number of migrants coming to Russia from Kazakhstan; however, this migration stream is different in its character, being composed predominantly of students and highly skilled professionals. In addition, Kazakhstan is experiencing economic growth and has itself become an immigration destination. As for Turkmenistan, it remains practically uninvolved in migration processes due to its isolationism.

In the analysis of the process of rebordering and boundary construction work within the previously united Soviet space, it is important to keep in mind the factor of time. By the mid to late 2000s the cultural distance between those who used to be 'ours' had significantly grown. The notion of Soviet unity had ebbed away and been replaced by the perception of post-Soviet states as separate political entities and cultures. If in the beginning labor migrants who came to Russia had a good knowledge of Russian language and shared Soviet experience, as time passed migration flows changed, bringing a younger generation with no

similar interiorized cultural capital. The latter is also relevant in Russia itself, where a new generation with no direct Soviet experience has grown. Under these conditions of growing cultural gaps, the mass influx of migrants was seemingly something of a surprise for Russian society, and, as public opinion polls have constantly shown, not entirely welcome. According to the Russian Public Opinion Research Center, ‘78% of respondents advocate for limiting the influx of migrants to Russia, 60% openly admit their hostility towards those of other nationalities, 52% agree that there are controversies between local citizens and newcomers’ (Trifonova, 2017). Against the background of general migrantophobia, labor migrants from Central Asia have become a locus for the concentration of xenophobic attitudes and the problematized ‘Other’ due to their visible large-scale presence on the streets of Russian cities and significant cultural and racial differences from the local population. Moreover, because migrants occupy a niche of low-paid service workers, mostly in construction, retail trade, or house-keeping, this boundary is also being shaped by existing class distinctions in Russia.

The state was not prepared psychologically or practically for Russia’s new role as an immigration country. Unlike the countries of post-World War II Europe that received labor migrants as a consequence of targeted policies (e.g. Castles, 2006), mass migration to Russia started spontaneously, promoted by asymmetries in economic development and visa-free mobility across the Commonwealth of Independent States. During the initial period of international migration to Russia, even the legal frameworks for migration management were in an embryonic stage, let alone migration policy and strategy. An important step towards the development of this new legal ground was the adoption in 2002 of the Federal Law ‘Concerning the legal status of foreign citizens in the Russian Federation’, which set bordering regimes for different categories of foreign citizens, including foreign citizens who had arrived in the Russian Federation under a visa-free procedure. To understand Russian migration policy as a policy of differential bordering, we need to explore the new categories of migrants that emerged and who was given preference in terms of moving to Russia. In 2010, during the presidency of Dmitry Medvedev (who had grounded his program on the idea of Russia’s modernization) the first targeted program of labor force recruitment was introduced. This program established migration preferences for skilled professionals and their family members. ‘Russia is the land of opportunities’ was a slogan that marked the political and ideological charge of that time. In 2006 (and again in 2012), another important migration instrument came into force—a state program to assist voluntary resettlement of compatriots living abroad to the Russian Federation.

While being exemplary even as mere announcements of state migration priorities and geopolitical ambitions (in particular the resettlement program operating with a very broad, ‘neo-imperialist’, definition of compatriots (Zevelev, 2008)), these measures have had relatively little impact on the socio-spatial reorganization of labor and justice (Mezzadra & Neison, 2011) in Russia and the post-Soviet space (Safronova, 2016). The greatest changes in this regard are most likely to have come as a result of the establishment and coming into force of a new transnational entity, the Eurasian Economic Union (EAEU). Created in 2014, the EAEU represents the most recent iteration of Eurasian (economic) integration promoted in particular by two leaders—Kazakh President Nursultan Nazarbaev and Russian President Vladimir Putin. The plan was to create a space of coordinated economic policy and free movement of goods, services, capital, and workforce (Popescu, 2014). According to the EAEU agreement, citizens of member states have the right to work in any Union country without a work permit, and not only by labor contract, but also by civil contract, which significantly expands opportunities for employment. Among other things, the contract involves access to the same social services offered to Russian citizens, education for children, and pension provision for the future. What is especially important is that the contract for one family member incorporates the entire family, i.e. it includes non-working family members and makes them eligible to stay in Russia for the duration of the

contract. Moreover, both working and non-working family members who are of citizens of EAEU countries are equal to the citizens of the country of work in terms of their access to the system of social support and therefore have the right to compulsory free medical insurance and education (Evraziiskaia ekonomicheskaia komissii, 2016).

Thus, the EAEU agreement entails significant simplification of Russia’s bordering regime for the citizens of member countries and its replacement with an unlimited (officially) access to the social space of the Russian Federation. The implementation of the EAEU agreement and its coming into operation has changed the configuration of the post-Soviet migration system significantly, creating new solidarities, new divisions, and new regimes of proximity and distance in the space of labor migration, impacting in particular on Russia as the largest receiving country.

Initially, the members of this Union were Russia, Belarus, and Kazakhstan, with Armenia and Kyrgyzstan joining in 2015. Kyrgyzstan’s accession to the EAEU in 2015 significantly changed the positioning of Kyrgyz nationals towards Russia’s social and legal space as well as towards other Central Asian nationals. Thanks to an agreement signed between the two countries, Kyrgyz nationals can obtain Russian citizenship according to a simplified procedure. Migrants from Tajikistan and Uzbekistan remain outside the circle of ‘privileged’ migrants and face the unique challenges of Russia’s bordering policies; it is their positioning that we consider below.

### The legalization of working migrants: ‘a border quest’

Several years ago, Olga Zhitlina, an artist from Saint Petersburg, and Andrey Iakimov, a human rights expert, invented and released a table game called ‘Russia—The Land of Opportunities’, critically appropriating the slogan-vision of Russia promoted by the state at the time. In this game, the players jump through bureaucratic hoops, face financial traps, and navigate between corrupt officials, policemen, unfair employers, and neo-Nazis, following the path of the migrant who came to Russia in search of employment. The game reflected difficulties faced by migrants at the time, and while there have been some changes in legislation and practice since then, the perception of the legalization process as an onerous, humiliating, and dangerous border-crossing quest captured by this game has remained the same.

The first boundary for a labor migrant is the need to register his/her place of residence within days of arriving in Russia. This procedure, referred to as residence registration, goes back to Soviet times and the infamous Soviet institution of residence registration (*propiska*) (Buckley, 1995). Similar to the *hukou* system of household registration in contemporary China (Chan, 2009), the *propiska* anchored an individual in place, allowing access to the labor market and social services only in the place of registration. Formally, the *propiska* was abolished in the early 1990s, but the legacy of this system has survived to the present day in people’s memories, as well as in collective memory and practices of the state, and has been transformed into a barrier for international migrants in particular. What is so difficult about acquiring a ‘good’ registration in Russia for a foreigner deserves a separate study; the problems include finding an apartment and a landlord who is ready to go through the registration procedure with the migrant, acquiring registration that would be recognized as valid and ‘authentic’ by the police (Reeves, 2015), and many others. As a necessary entry point into the legalization process, registration became a commodity on the black market and, state attempts to fight its marketization notwithstanding, remains a highly problematic issue. Moreover, as we will consider later, residence registration functions as the major threshold for accessing social goods for migrants and their families.

Furthermore, to enter the labor market, a migrant from a visa-free country must get a so-called labor license (*trudovoi* patent). Introduced in 2015 as a replacement for the work permit system, the labor license system was meant to solve the issue of brokering businesses issuing fake work permits (Reeves, 2015), as well as to alleviate migrants’ financial

burdens through a flexible payment system. However, in practice the license system has put new obstacles in the way of migrants. Now the paperwork necessary to draw up the document includes not only private medical insurance and a health certificate confirming that the migrant has no drug addiction or any infectious diseases, but also a certificate of knowledge of Russian language, history, and basic legal principles. Thus, in order to receive a license, a migrant has to pass a test on language and basic laws. The cost of these tests, the medical examination, the insurance plan, and the general fee for the license amount to 25,000 rubles (about 350 euros in winter 2018), which places a financial burden on people who have just arrived in search of employment. Thus, the procedure of legalization for migrant workers is turned into a system of borders related to health, language, and finance. Having made it through all the borders, migrants must confirm their status every month by paying 1500–3000 rubles, depending on their region of residence. They can then reside in the Russian Federation for a year or more if the license is renewed.

In addition to the technical and financial difficulties, the border quest also presents serious emotional, psychological, and physical challenges, as demonstrated in the quote below:

I need to resubmit my papers soon, and I am thinking about it with horror. We are held outside in the cold for three-four hours; last time I spent eight hours in order to receive the ready papers. So, we are there, in the cold, and nobody comes out to say ‘wait, this will be then ...’. It is a sheer mockery. And at the doctor’s? They treat us very inadequately. I feel especially sorry for those who do not know Russian. They bark at them like dogs, although they could explain and give assistance; of course, a person gets even more lost. (woman from Uzbekistan, 39 years old, 2016)

It is also important to note that the environment where this legalization quest takes place—the migration policies and practices of the Russian Federation—is incredibly dynamic and unstable. In particular, there are constant changes in the rules and requirements for residence and employment of foreigners in the Russian Federation (Kondakov, 2015; Troitskii, 2016, p. 16). In order to track these changes, even a professional has to put in some effort, much less foreign citizens with no legal training. An officer of the Federal Migration Service told us in an interview (2015) that he begins every working day by monitoring the website of the Directorate of the Federal Migration Service (UFMS) to learn the news and amendments to migration law. The lack of transparency and integrity is considered a drawback in itself, and if we combine it with this fluidity and a lack of any serious efforts in legal instruction on the part of authorized bodies, the scope of problems in this field becomes evident.

Besides its volatility, there is another characteristic of Russia’s migration space that has a significant influence on the lives of migrants, and this is the steady trend towards enhancing the ‘policing’ approach to migration. A graphic illustration of this trend is the abolition of the Federal Migration Service and delegation of its authority to the Ministry of Internal Affairs in May, 2016. As Nevins (2014, p. 14) demonstrated that in the case of US immigration control in the California-Mexico borderlands, “the ‘migration’ of immigration regulation” within the state bureaucracy reflect changes in state perceptions of migrants, and this has proved to be the case as well in Russia’s migration service. The Federal Migration Service was set up in 1992 on the base of the Committee on Population Migration under the Ministry of Labor and Employment of the Russian Federation and represented a civic institution, a federal executive authority designed to implement the ‘population migrations supervision policy’ (Voronkov, Gladarev, & Sagitova, 2011). In the early 2000s, the FMS was reprioritized to supervise external labor migration, and in particular to counter illegal immigration. Until 2016, the structure had changed its ‘affiliation’ several times, swinging between a law enforcement agency and a civic structure, referring and submitting to the former or the latter depending on current challenges and political situation. The return of migration management to the

main law enforcement agency of the country fits in with the general logic of strengthening the power of the state and reflects a conceptual shift in migration policy. Today migrants are seen by the state, first and foremost, as potential illegal aliens, which indeed reduces migration policy and practice to particular bordering practices aimed at public order maintenance and fighting ‘evil’. Such a position radically contradicts the opinion that is widespread among scientists and civil society representatives—that ‘we should intensify civic regulation of immigration, legalize migrants, integrate them, and not focus on prohibitive functions’ (Sergei Abashin, cited in Gurkov, 2016).

The most visible evidence of the strengthening of the bordering regime and its policing is the introduction of administrative expulsion and an entry ban for any migrant who violates conditions on the length of stay and employment regime on the territory of Russia. To create a legal basis for this policy, during 2013 and 2014 several dozen changes and amendments were inserted into the corresponding documents, which made a long-term entry ban to the Russian Federation, as well as administrative expulsion from the country, an important element of modern Russian migration policy. As stated in the report of Civil Assistance Committee (Troitskii, 2016, p. 21) in 2013–2015 the Federal Migration Service alone enforced entry bans to Russia in more than 1,600,000 cases. Administrative violations causing migrants’ deportations with a subsequent entry ban were not confined to violations of the migration regime; they also included violations of highway codes, failing to produce ID documents when stopped by the police, and residing and working in a region different from that of official registration. In other words, the reasons for the entry ban are ‘absolutely arbitrary’, making the system of including people in the blacklists ‘totally absurd’ (interview with a lawyer in Khujand, Tajikistan, cited in ADC Memorial, 2016, p. 35). In October 2013, when the toughening of migration laws yielded its first results, the Head of the FMS in his speech before the State Duma openly mentioned the ban on entry for up to 3000 foreign citizens a day as a success (Troitskii, 2016, pp. 22–23). Successes of this sort leave no room for doubt that the main migration service of Russia now sees migration policy primarily as a tool for constructing barriers and keeping unwanted persons out of the state.

While the alleged reasons for the entry ban are multiple, the violation of the rules on length of stay is one of the most commonly cited. In order to stay in Russia legally for the long term, a person from a non-visa country must have a valid labor license. Without the license, a foreigner from a visa-free country is not allowed to stay in Russia more than 90 days out of 180, as the state recognizes only employed individuals, labor migrants, and does not provide any other legal options for those who have come to Russia but do not have official employment. This impacts most upon non-working family members, creating everyday boundaries for those who come as families.

### Migration to Russia as a family project

Whereas mass labor migration from Central Asia to Russia started with the temporary migration of men, over time the situation started to change, and by the mid-2000s the gender ratio of migrants became less skewed (Khushkadamova, 2010; Tiuriukanova, 2005, 2011). Moreover, another shift happened: for many people, what initially started as a temporary work stay gradually transformed into a long-term life project. According to expert estimates, whilst about 40% of migrants come to Russia for up to two years, 25–30% stay longer (interview with Iulia Florinskaia, Poekhali?, 2011). In many cases migration either gradually transforms into a family project, or engages family from the outset. Approximately every third migrant comes with a spouse (more than 50% of women migrants come with their husbands), and about 10% of migrants come with children (while about half have children) (Florinskaia, Mkrtschan, Maleva, & Kirillova, 2015, p. 70).

In 2015, Armenia and Kyrgyzstan, important migrant-sending countries to Russia, entered the Eurasian Economic Union. This event transformed migration in general and family migration in particular,

which was reflected in an information brochure produced by the Eurasian Economic Committee, the governing body of the EAEU. Pictures in the brochure vividly illustrate the benefits of accession to EAEU, contrasting a happy migrant family from a member country that arrives and gets easily established in Russia with a sad and lonely migrant from a non-member country who has to leave the family behind—or, as we see, brings the family and faces a number of problems, the first of which has to do with the status of non-working family members and their regime of stay.

#### *Time dimension: the 90/180 rule as an intra-family border*

The difference in status between employed and unemployed migrants lies at the root of the problem with family migration from Central Asian countries. As we discussed above, a migrant must obtain a labor license for a legal long-term stay. A non-working citizen of a visa-free country can stay in Russia no more than 90 days out of 180. Thus, after staying for a three-month period, a non-working family member either has to leave the country for another three months or split the time of their stay, stretching their allowed 90 days over half a year. In practice, the migrant worker's family members either abide by this rule and must travel in and out all the time, or they stay in Russia and fall into the space of illegality. To relieve themselves of endless travelling and the possibility of becoming illegal, a family member can, of course, purchase a license, thus becoming a migrant worker legible to the state. However, the one-time purchase of the license and the following monthly payments are costly for a family with children. Besides, in most cases the family does not even consider buying a license for the wife (or in rare cases, for the husband), expecting that this family member will do household work and take care for children:

So, here she is, I registered her for three months, yes. And then, to register again, it is necessary that she would cross (the border), go to Tajikistan and come back, you know? And my children, they study here, they need to be looked after. Thanks to the teacher who helped with their registration ... And we also cannot leave them, you know? But there is no such law that the wife will give birth and will be sitting here. And so she has to leave Russia on a regular basis. And so that children can study peacefully—there is also no such thing. And she, a migration service employee, says: “And we don't care. You cannot break the law!” And I say that if you accept a normal ... just a normal human law, then no one will actually break it ... Then I said to my wife: “Well, sit here and we'll see”. (Man, 33 years old, from Tajikistan, 2016)

In this family's case, the wife was later given a three-year entry ban for violation of the regime of stay. She is now in Tajikistan, while a grandfather has come to Russia to look after the children.

#### *Space constraints: registration as an obstacle to accessing social benefits*

Besides time constraints, another set of difficulties faced by migrant families has to do with space. As human rights organizations have warned, the old logic of *propiska* is constantly striking back, trying to re-establish itself through various legal means. For example, the government regularly attempts to link the right to children's education to their registration (Bukhari-zade, 2015). According to the law ‘On Education in the Russian Federation,’ enacted in 1992, all primary, secondary, and professional educational institutions are obliged to enroll all school-aged children, regardless of their nationality or citizenship; thus, registration or its absence cannot be a reason for refusing to admit a child to an educational institution. However, in 2014 the Ministry of Education and Science issued a decree that limits the right to education for children who have no permanent or long-term registration in Russia. According to this decree, the necessary enrollment documents include a certificate of registration. When refusing to accept foreign children, school headmasters refer to this very decree or to the limits of school

capacity. “A lot depends on the headmaster's will,” say the experts, concluding the conversation on possible difficulties on the way to education for migrant children (Bukhari-zade, 2015; our interviews).

In large cities (including Saint Petersburg, where we conducted our study), there is a shortage of available space in kindergartens. This problem affects local citizens as well as migrants; however, the latter, not knowing how to navigate the system, turn out to be more vulnerable to the problem. As one Saint Petersburg expert, a local resident, commented in an interview:

It's a quest in itself to make it to a kindergarten—it was a great success for us to finally get a place for our child eight kilometers from home, after three years of waiting and other hassles. And how it is for a migrant!?

As a result, according to research data, only 15–25% of migrant children attend kindergarten, while the figure for children of Russian citizens varies from 50 to 80% (depending on the region). For those coming from Central Asia this appears to be particularly difficult—one third of those interviewed reported these difficulties (and only 10% of all children from Central Asia go to kindergarten in Russia) (Florinskaia, 2012b, p. 120).

Registration or, to be precise, its absence is also a serious obstacle to getting social help for migrants, the most vulnerable of whom are women and children. In the words of Andrey Iakimov, a human rights activist and a member of the NGO PSP–Fond (Saint Petersburg):

We sometimes receive very sad requests from women who were abandoned here with children. They believed they were in a Muslim marriage, and the husband had a different opinion—at a certain time, he ends the Muslim marriage without her consent—and that's it, and the woman finds herself on the street with a child or even a couple ... In this case, we can help find a shelter, a private one, by the way. There are no public shelters working with this category—because there can be document problems, and all shelters are very afraid of it now. The public shelters simply don't have appropriate services for non-citizens and non-Petersburgers, by the way, also because it has to do with registration. (Interview, May 2016)

In summary, such a system of boundaries has serious ramifications for migrant lives. The time boundary fractures family life, forcing family members to live apart and/or regularly move between Russia and their country of origin. Registration as a system of spatial binding pushes migrants beyond the boundaries of ‘Russia’ as a social state, excluding them from the system of social support and preventing their socialization as members of Russian society. In the case of children, the effects of these two boundaries appear particularly acute: the necessity of registration hampers their access to education, while limitations on the duration of their stay put in jeopardy the continuity of the education process and their daily lives in general.

In experts' opinion, the consequences this system of boundaries has for the Russian state itself are no less negative. For Russia, which is experiencing demographic problems, the policy of non-inclusion of migrants, and the barriers to social integration of children in particular, can be seen as improvident and short-sighted:

It's sad that so few kids have made it to the socializing state institutes. It is very bad. It means that the state is losing this lever and does not really see it as a problem. (Expert interview, July 2017)

## Conclusion

‘One step forward, two steps backwards’—this is how experts characterize Russia's migration policy. The experience of the last fifteen years has shown that processes of liberalization go hand in hand with the strengthening of migration regimes. In the end, even the measures celebrated for simplifying migrants' situations—such as the cancellation of the quota system and the introduction of labor patents—turn into a

new system of boundaries and challenges. Today, Russian migration policy and practice are essentially designed to be systems of boundary maintenance, aimed at the distancing and exclusion of migrants and characterized by a lack of consistent and coherent mechanisms working towards their integration.

Even though there are numerous experts and studies that demonstrate the pragmatic value of migration for a Russia with a declining population (e.g. Zaionchkovskaia, 2006), the state has not yet shifted its vision of migration from a security problem to an opportunity. In line with this perception, migrants are predominantly seen as dangerous Others, or in the best case as *homo laborans*—cheap labor, an expendable resource. The manifold boundaries and limited access to spheres of life other than work, including the social sphere, create structural conditions for this ‘expendability’.

As our material shows, both sides, the state as well as the migrants, are obfuscated by the illusion of temporariness. The state turns a blind eye to the fact that, for many people, life in migration lasts for decades and does not adequately account for this in its migration policy. Migrants themselves may live out of a suitcase for years, making their entire transnational family live in a state of temporariness. Temporariness sets a life format and style, defines family structure and configuration, and shapes identities and systems of belonging (including citizenship). The optics of temporariness, shared by the state and migrants, sets the terms of existence for all people in the migration space in a way that prevents integration. Such a vision seriously impedes the possibilities for integrational thinking that might challenge the restrictive bordering paradigm of the state. As Gavkhar Dzhuraeva, director of the NGO Migration and Law, has put it, “There is no integration strategy in Russia, and in this sense it is difficult to refer to the Russian society as a (genuinely) receiving side’ (Poekhali?, 2011). She, along with other practitioners and scholars, call for the transformation of state viewpoints and the creation of an integration policy and practical measures that could transform migrants from people who are temporarily staying into people who are living in Russia. There seems to be some movement in this direction at the level of legislation: on August 1, 2017, the Federal Agency on Nationalities submitted to the government a bill on the social and cultural adaptation and integration of migrants. However, on the ground, as we learned in Saint Petersburg (expert interview, July 2017), many established and well-functioning state initiatives aimed at the social integration of migrants have been curtailed. These are the initiatives that worked towards integration in its most mundane, most human sense, organizing education and providing other kinds of help in crossing the social boundaries in Russia for migrant families with children. Importantly, these initiatives also embraced the most vulnerable groups—that is, foreigners whose legal status could be regarded as questionable by the state. As well as the adoption of the bill on integration, the Ministry of Internal Affairs also submitted a law on migrant deportation.

Moreover, the dominating bordering paradigm of the state hampers even the inclusion of those who are considered privileged, as in the case of EAEU citizens. This is exemplified by how Russian ministries have resisted giving free medical insurance to family members of EAEU workers despite of the letter of Union agreement (expert interview, July 2017). This indicates a particular position in Russia in relation to de- and rebordering processes. Whilst the EAEU might initially have been compared to the European Union, it is clear that the freedom of movement and de-bordering it mandates are being undermined by everyday re-bordering processes, such as in healthcare. This proves once again that, like many other migrant-receiving countries (cf. Yuval-Davis et al., 2017 on the UK), Russia's system of de- and rebordering is becoming more and more complex and diverse, both in terms of the differential status of migrant groups, but also the spaces in which bordering practices are taking place. In spite of its many differences with the West, it seems likely that Russia will also continue to deploy the logic of enabling migration that is of economic benefit to the country—low-paid, precarious labor—whilst also mitigating any ‘costs’ to

itself in terms of state support.

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## Appendix A. Supplementary data

Supplementary data related to this article can be found at <http://dx.doi.org/10.1016/j.polgeo.2018.04.006>.

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