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Racism and migrants

Russian society is deeply divided amongst "ethno-centric lines" argues Vladimir Malakhov. Bureaucracy and the police possess intricate means with which to discriminate against immigrants whilst the media is playing its part in reinforcing stereotypes about non-Slavic minorities. Malakhov calls for a new, structured way of looking at migration problems on a sociological level.

The way we act directly depends on the categories by means of which we order and organise social reality. This, roughly, is what sociologists mean when they talk about the discursive organisation of society. In what follows I would like to propose some thoughts on the categories at the basis of the discursive organisation of Russian society. More precisely, on those which determine the perception of migration in Russia.

Russian officials always know which card to draw from their rhetorical pack. Depending on the situation, they either talk about the multinational character of the country, about the need to reinforce the friendship between peoples and foster "dialogue between cultures", about the "national question" (which, appendix-like, is in the habit of unexpectedly causing pain to the state organism) growing more serious, or about "inter-ethnic relations" worsening (assuming that relations between "ethnies", like those between neighbours, can improve or deteriorate), or finally about the dangerous consequences of the "conflict of cultures". The paradigm of "cultural conflict" (or "clash of civilisations" in another version) has come in handy for our bureaucrats. The formula is fashionable, it is sanctified by the authority of a venerable political scientist, and it frees them from responsibility. A bloody fight for the redistribution of property breaks out, we're unable to stop it, but that's not surprising, since it is fuelled by "ethnic crime" and the "Chechen" ("Azeri", "Georgian") mafia. Skinheads flock together in order to terrorise those they consider "Black"; once more we're helpless; but again there is an explanation: it's a reaction to a "tilted ethnic balance". The villages are becoming depopulated, the economy lacks two and a half million workers each year, but instead of working out measures to attract and adapt migrants, we keep talking about threats to "ethno-cultural security".

An analysis of the patterns which mould what the authorities say about "the problem of migration" reveals a twofold structure. First, they wearily express their concern about the uncontrollable flow of non-Russian migrants, which is identified with a flow of crime, drug addiction, unemployment etc; and next, they cheerfully report about the law-enforcement agencies' success in catching illegal immigrants. The bureaucratic mind cannot and will not reveal the content of the expression "illegal migrants". In fact, why are they in an illegal position? Out of malicious intent, or due to objective reasons? Reasons such as registration rules which, to put it mildly, not everyone is able to comply with? According to Bureaucratise, the illegals are mainly "foreign citizens and

persons without citizenship". But where do these "foreign citizens" come from? From Kazakhstan, whose citizens still have no passport except their Soviet one, or from Vietnam? And how did they get to the territory that this particular official is in charge of? Did they come here for seasonal work, as Moldovans, Ukrainians and others do, or did they escape from places where they were threatened with physical destruction, as is the case of Meskhetians from Uzbekistan, Kurds from Iraq, or those Afghans who, in the Eighties, were building socialism together with the Soviet Union, only to become the prey of the Mojaheddin in the Nineties? And finally, who are these people by profession, age, and education? What are their social and linguistic skills? Do they associate their future with Russia or do they regard Russia as a temporary place of stay?

It would be useless to expect the bureaucrats to be seriously interested in such questions. In their usage, the very "problem of migration" is but a mythological construct, a comfortable common denominator which serves as a blanket for a multitude of different problems instead of helping to solve them.

Moreover, the "problem of migration" is very effective as a scarecrow to be displayed to the man in the street in order to rid him of any desire to think. It is not a coincidence that all officials who discuss this problem on television present the topic of migration in terms of a menace. Migrants claim scarce goods. Migrants are potential if not actual criminals. And due the deep cultural chasm between them and us, migrants destroy social cohesion. We live in an ethno-cultural harmony, where the simple old-age pensioner and the head of an oil company are both part of one organism, whereas those newcomers are alien to that organism and therefore threaten our ethno-cultural security.

Just as the ethnic diversity of migrants merges into an indistinct blot dubbed "the Blacks", thus the diversity of social collisions linked to migration merges into a single blot called "the problem of migration".

If we make an effort to scrutinise this vague entity, we will be able to discern a number of components. Let's start with the economic one. Above all this is about employment issues. These are especially serious in regions of so-called "oversupply of labour". But is it true, as a widespread opinion would have it, that migrants take jobs away from the local population? Or do they more often occupy those segments of the labour market where the locals do not readily go (petty trade, kebab or cheburek¹ eateries etc)? Sociological studies show that in this segment, as well as among middle-men, competition is higher among groups of migrants than between them and the natives. Moreover, successful entrepreneurs create jobs rather than taking them away. The same goes for the opinion that migrants claim scarce social goods. Working people are not just consumers, but also producers of resources. What would Moscow's construction firms do without cheap labour from Central Asia? What would *dacha* builders from Central and North-West Russia do without navvies from Tajikistan, concrete workers from Moldova, stonemasons from Armenia, and carpenters from Ukraine?

Another component in the complex of issues linked to migration is the social element: the burden on cities' infrastructure, the rise in crime, the upsurge of xenophobic feelings, the strengthening of extreme nationalist groups. It is with xenophobia and right-wing radicalism that people usually associate the notorious "ethnic balance", damage to which, they say, leads to a surge of xenophobia, which in turn makes various "fronts for the liberation of Russian territory" surface. But who measures this balance, and using what criteria? At

what number of migrants is it breached? And how do we calculate this number – do we lump together all those who are ethnically different from the majority, including those who settled a relatively long time ago and are well integrated into local life, or do we except certain people? And finally, how do we categorise the children of migrants, who finished school here and consider this place their home?

What is special about public issues is their discursive nature. I would even say their discursive origin. A problem becomes public only once it is being publicly discussed. In Russia, for instance, the issue of disabled people does not exist. It does exist in the West, but not here. What does exist are people suffering from an inability to lead a fulfilled social life (because of the lack of decent wheelchairs, premises for the disabled in public transport or house entrances, and so on); but since society is absolutely indifferent to these topics, the *problem* does not exist.

Thus a problem is created by talking about the problem. But this means that we can create any problem. For example, we know that in our society, there is a high level of crime. But as long as TV and radio journalists as well as press reporters and commentators call the suspects suspects and the criminals criminals, rather than "Chechens", "Azeris" or "people of Caucasian nationality", we do not know that there is a problem of "ethnic crime". It seems that the "breach of the ethnic balance" is one of those dangers which we never suspect exists until we turn on our TV set.

Don't get me wrong. I am not saying that all problems linked to migration are imaginary and should be brushed off. The objective of my essay is to attract attention to those ways of conceptualising these problems that make them unsolvable.

Let us try to trace how such concepts as "cultural conflict", "ethno-cultural security" and "ethnic balance" enter the language of the bureaucracy. They are borrowed from the language of the expert community. But where do the experts themselves find these concepts? Not in the pure ether of thought, probably. The holders of degrees in history, philosophy and psychology who consult officials are mortals, too. Like all mortals, they have sympathies, idiosyncrasies and preconceptions. Living in a specific *milieu*, they share many of the prejudices of this *milieu*. Especially those transmitted by the mass media. The mass media machinery generates such a powerful background noise that even a transcendental subject would hardly be able to resist its influence. The more so for an empirical subject. And so we come full circle. On the TV screens, journalists interview statesmen; in order to legitimise their actions, the latter point to expert opinion; meanwhile, experts shape their opinion under the influence of TV.

The force of images seen on television is indeed colossal. Only hard-boiled non-conformists may resist this force. I discovered this in 1999, when discussing the bombing of Yugoslavia that had taken place in the spring of that year with my Austrian friends. Nine out of ten of my friends and colleagues were convinced that Serbia had to be bombed. They had been convinced of this by the images they had been shown over the previous years.

It is interesting to recall how our mass media reported on last July's events in Krasnoarmeysk (a mass fight involving Armenian migrants and slightly tight local youths). Let's take a liberal channel, REN-TV: there's a brief report about what happened; an interview with youngsters demonstrating in front on

the police building to protest against the detention of their friends involved in the brawl; and footage from a rally at a Palace of Culture where the protesters demand that the authorities expel all Caucasians from town. Next, an interview with a representative of the "Armenian diaspora" (not from Kranoarmeysk, no: a federal-level functionary) wondering why Russians treat Armenians so unfairly; after all, the Russian and Armenian peoples have always lived in peace and harmony. The report closes with pieces of analysis: experts quote data about the number of Armenians in Russia, then gradually move to the topic of ethnic crime and its connection to drug traffic. For a titbit, we are treated – guess what! – to information about the number of Azeri gangs in Moscow.

This way of presenting things is all the more symptomatic since this report didn't come out on pointedly Orthodox "Muscovy", but on a channel priding itself on its openness. There is a whole system of tacit assumptions behind such reports, and these assumptions in turn reflect a specific type of perception: the ethnocentric type. Once viewed through an ethnocentric prism, social conflicts look like conflicts between "ethnies" (and the cultures, religions and ways of life associated with them).

The ethnocentric imagery has permeated the substance of the Russian mass media. Imagined *à la* Lev Nikolayevich Gumilyov² to resemble living organisms, *ethnies* are used by our journalists and experts as replacements of *social* groups.

Allow me to dwell on this in somewhat greater detail. Theoretically, any set of people singled out by a given criterion may be called a group. Blondes or people who wear glasses, say. However, in order for a set of people to count as a social group, it needs to fulfil two criteria: among its members, there must be both firm ties and a specialisation of roles. Individuals appearing as a group to the external observer on the basis of certain attributes (shape of nose, language, behaviour) do not necessarily constitute a group in the sociological sense of the word. Those relegated to a unit called "Armenians" by statistics need not belong a social unit. A native Saint-Petersburger with an Armenian surname who plays in a symphonic orchestra and a refugee from Stepanakert working engaged in small-time shoe trade have no more in common than two blonde people. "The Armenians" do not exist as a social group. REN-TV's correspondents and the experts they invited mistook a statistical unit for a real agent of social action.

The word "racism" used in the title of this essay does not refer to something that bears no relation to our life or touches it only peripherally, such as extremist groups whose actions make decent people blush. I use the word "racism" in a strict sense. Racism is the claim that there is an interdependence between a certain group's social position and its cultural features. Racism starts when it is alleged that a certain group of people engages in a certain type of activity not due to historical, economic and a host of other reasons, but because such are this group's essential attributes. The origin of these attributes is not traced biologically. Contemporary racism rarely speaks about blood and genotype, but it does always speak about culture. "They" act as they do because this type of behaviour is determined by their culture. And there is nothing you can do about this. Some people *must* clean boots, others *must* sell drugs, and others still *must* be racketeers.

Racist thinking pervades our consciousness. We are all a little bit racist. We believe in ethnic balance. We tacitly approve of the everyday humiliation of

people in the metro under the pretext of "passport checks"; after all, those who are checked do look somehow wrong. Our consciousness has no room for the idea that public order might be possible without the institution of *propiska*³. We do not see what, except restrictive measures, could deal with the dangers migration carries with it. We are moved by a logic of fear in which cause and effect have swapped places.

The real collision which migrants of "non-Slavic" nationality are faced with in Krasnodar, Stavropol' or Moscow is quite clear. It is rooted in the system of registration which, as everybody knows, is only a euphemism for the *propiska* system outlawed by the Constitution. It is extremely difficult and sometimes downright impossible to obtain a registration. The absence of a registration means the absence of legal status, and that in turn means that it is impossible to find a job or rent a flat legally, etc. It is clear that the more difficult the circumstances people find themselves in, the more likely becomes the appearance of deviant forms of behaviour in their midst. The circle is closed by a rise of social tensions and xenophobic feelings.

Racist thinking imagines a different causal chain: non-Russian migrants' propensity for deviant behaviour → rise of social tensions → need for restrictive measures and, in particular, special registration rules for members of certain groups.

It is strange to hear how reputable experts (and officials quoting their data) say that in Moscow and the Moscow *oblast'* [region], there are "already around 1.5 million Muslims". Apparently, this figure has been obtained by adding the numbers of Tatars and Azeris leaving in and around the capital, plus those originating in Dagestan and other regions of the North Caucasus. The logic behind these calculations assumes that the Southerners migrating into the Centre are a group separated from the majority by a huge cultural distance. This is no laughing matter: history shows that it has not always been possible even to build bridges for a dialogue between Christianity and Islam; and in a situation of socio-economic instability, we may not be far from a conflict of civilisations. Do those who say this believe in what they try to instil in their listeners? I will allow myself to doubt this. The assumption of a cultural incompatibility between the Slavic majority and non-Slavic minorities is absurd. If only because the vast majority of non-Russian migrants in Russia are from the former Soviet republics, and those from the North Caucasus are even Russian citizens. Culturally they are Soviet people. Their "ethnicity" is Soviet, however much specialists in ethno-psychology may attempt to persuade us of the contrary. Most of these people were socialised under the same conditions as everybody else in the country. They went to the same school, they served in (or evaded) the same army, they were members of the same semi-voluntary organisations. They usually speak perfect Russian. As to religious identity, most of those dubbed Muslims have hardly been to a mosque more often than those called Orthodox have been to a Christian church.

Of course, there is a cultural distance between the migrants and the receiving population. But once more, this is due to distinctive ways of socialisation, and the distinctive habits acquired in the process. It is the distance between rural dwellers and townspeople, between inhabitants of small towns and residents of anonymous megalopolises. It is the distance between poorly educated people with little social skills and an environment with a higher level of education and, consequently, advanced professional skills. Cultural differences are just trimmings to structural and functional differences.

People become members of specific groups depending on the social resources at their disposal. The bureaucracy, for example, has a resource called power. The members of this group use this resource with maximum efficiency by superimposing so many restrictions upon the procedure of registration in big cities that potential bribers are obliged to queue. Is there any need to add that the most generous of the latter are those who find it most difficult to register? They are the "non-Russians", a group which in its turn breaks up into several sub-groups, depending on the severity of the secret instructions applying to them. Large-scale proprietors have another resource: the possibility to employ people. Once again, it will be unnecessary to remind you that "non-Russians" having no rights and no passport are prepared to work, and do work, under the harshest circumstances, where no-one even thinks about medical insurance and the other luxuries of advanced capitalism. The resources at the disposal of our glorious police are known to everyone who has observed with what zeal they stop passers-by of a certain outward appearance, and how disappointed they look whenever these people's ID turns out to be in order.

This is how migrants of non-Russian origin become members of this or that ethnic group. We do not know what part the "natural" longing for "one's own people" plays in this. But we do know that even if they were burning with desire to assimilate completely, they would hardly manage. Conditions are such that they are forced to join existing ethnic networks, thus condemning themselves to existing in a sort of ghetto. But in the eyes of a group not faced with such problems (the Russian majority), this behaviour looks like a cultural reflex – the non-Russian migrants' desire not to live like everybody else.

It seems to me that we need to shift the discussion on problems of migration from the cultural-psychological level to a socio-structural level. We should not talk about dialogue/conflict between cultures, not about "tolerance", but about the deep social, and above all, legal changes without which all invectives against racism and all calls for inter-ethnic tolerance will remain so much hot air.

¹ A kind of meat or cheese pasty originally eaten in the Crimea and the Caucasus, but now widely popular across Russia. [Translator's note]

² A Soviet-era geographer, historian and self-styled "neo-Eurasian" who expounded an organicist theory of the "rise and fall" of ethnic groups that bore marked nationalist and anti-Semitic features. His works have been extremely popular in Russia since the late 1980s. [Translator's note]

³ A system of compulsory registration whereby people must, independently of any temporary, rented or owned accommodation, be "attached" to one apartment (which may not be sold or rented out without their consent). Although outlawed by the constitution, this Soviet-era system is still effectively practised in Russia in the framework of various local "registration laws", gives rise to widespread corruption and discriminatory practices and makes it very difficult for immigrants to obtain residence permits. [Translator's note]

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