

Representation of Migrants in the Public Discourse of Russia

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Abstract. Public attitudes toward immigrants in contemporary Russia are rather negative and significantly more hostile than in European countries. To trace the relationship between attitudes toward migrants and their representation in the media and political discourse I turn to the Russian mass media as one of the meaning-making factories in the society. As a database to evaluate whether there has been a change in stereotyping of migrants in the mass media over the recent decade, I utilize the newspapers sub-corpus of the Russian National Corpus. On the basis of a content-analysis of 254,000 texts from 2008 to 2014 I conclude about both official and popular dissociations of migrants with the idea of ‘ethnic criminality’ in the period after 2010. On the popular level, the association between ethnicity and criminality has declined, even though references to ethnic groups and migrants increased over the same period of time.

Keywords: migrants, public discourse, ethnic stereotypes, ethnic crime, Russia

Introduction

Previous research has shown that public attitudes toward immigrants in contemporary Russia are rather negative and significantly more hostile than in European countries [Gudkov, 2006; Pain, 2007; Malinkin, 2013; Iakimova & Menshikov, 2019]. Scholars identify the prevalence of xenophobic attitudes among Russians on the level of more than 60 % and characterize it as a quite stable across all social strata over the recent decade [Laruelle, 2009; Gorodzeisky, Glikman & Maskileyson, 2015].

The prevalence of negative sentiment toward migrants and ethnic stereotypes is also evidenced by national opinion polls, which recorded a very high level of xenophobia amidst the population. In August 2020, for instance, 73 percent of Russian survey participants stated that the influx of labour migrants into the country should be limited [Levada-Center, 2020]. Respondents

regularly report that members of other nationalities bring with them more problems than solutions for the country. Official state data showing that migrants are no more likely to commit crimes than the supposedly 'native' population flatly contradicts this assumed connection [Dmitrieva, 2013]. Nevertheless, migrantophobia is widespread among even liberally-inclined Russians, as well as strong among more conservative circles. It is exactly the ability to unite such an impressive scope of public opinion that explains rallies against migrants in more liberal Russian cities (like Ekaterinburg and St. Petersburg) at the same time as pseudo-pogroms in the Moscow suburb of Biryulevo-West and Arzamas. Emil' Pain called this 'negative consolidation' the only unifying basis for Russian society in its current condition [cited by RBC.ru, 2013].

Similarly, Kozhevnikova [2008] highlighted the utility of anti-migrant rhetoric to electoral campaigns in Russia, providing a resource with which politicians mobilized their electorates. The political practice of recent years shows that ethnicity became one of the most overt ways of mobilizing the electorate, so everyday problems often acquired the semblance of inter-ethnic clashes. The conflicts of Russians with external migrants, as well as internal (from the North Caucasus) are associated in many cases with the unresolved problems of crime, shadow employment, and corruption. In order to shift public discontent onto a convenient scapegoat, the authorities often contrive to depict these conflicts as ethnic in origin. By constantly reporting data on the growth of crime connected with migrants (especially in Moscow), the authorities manipulate public opinion and incite panic in the population.

Migrants in the media and political discourse

The mass media provides an opportunity to evaluate the relationship between the representation of migrants in the media and political discourse and attitudes toward them spread amidst the population. To trace this relationship, we turn to the Russian mass media — one of the meaning-making factories in any society, although perhaps especially in contemporary Russia.

Indeed, studies of the Russian press [see, for example, Peshkova, 2004] found that, in the first decade of the new millennium, reporting often featured migrants connected to criminal activity or conflicts. By casting cultural difference as the cause of social conflict, the mass media hailed migrants into the position of threat.

This was even more stark in the work of Vesnina [2010], who investigated the use of military metaphors when referring to migrants. In the framework of this metaphor, articles referred to migrants as foreign ('insidious mountaineers'; 'Azeris'; 'Churka'; and 'cross-eyed'), as invaders ('horde'; 'legion'; and even 'army') and as coming to Russia 'to fight for a place in the Sun'. Interactions between locals and migrants were described using similar military metaphors, such as 'occupying', 'storming', 'conquering', and 'capturing'. Thus, when the lines 'some urban spaces are already captured' appears, it becomes possible for those acting against the presence of migrants to be 'liberating' an urban space or raising 'protective barriers'. Migrants become hostile enemies against whom various kinds of resistance are warranted, or even demanded. When inter-ethnic relations become viewed through the lens provided by such discourse, it is not surprising that violence is the result.

In the first decade of the 2000s, visibly different foreign labor migrants who come to Russia predominantly from Central Asia (Tajikistan, Uzbekistan and Kyrgyzstan) were mostly represented negatively in the media. This happened not necessarily because journalists or media presenters are hostile to migrants but because (1) the specific topics of news involving migrants (mostly crime reports); (2) the language used (commonly involving derogatory comments); and finally (3) the headlines (provocative and often scary). Research on the media discourse in Russia shows that publications that mention migrants primarily deal with cases where migrants violate the law or are involved in criminal acts. Such texts depicted migrants as 'drug dealers', 'criminals', or a 'menace' even when their activity is legal [Iakimova, 2015].

Similarly, texts alluding to migrants represented them as a 'threat to national security', for example 'the number of migrants is getting larger, so that in the future they might outnumber the indigenous population', or 'migrants are culturally distant, they do not want to integrate and are poorly adapted'. Finally, the headlines of some news pieces about migrants speak for themselves: 'Drugs Were Burned', 'Contraband Came from China', 'Hashish Was Transported by Trucks', 'Poppy Seeds Were Transported in Sacks', 'Choked to Death by Duct Tape', 'We Are Already Not Numerous Enough', and so forth. These texts disseminate latent negative assessments of migrants through dichotomous oppositions; the use of stereotypical images of legal and illegal employment of migrants such as 'gastarbeiters', 'low-level workers', 'drug couriers'. Other standard phrases with negative overtones include, for example, 'illegal immigrants', 'ethnic and cultural closure', and 'cultural detachment',

as well as combinations of words that emphasize foreignness, for instance, 'native of Tajikistan' [Iakimova, 2015, 130]. Thus, the media extends negative attitudes toward migrants even without mentioning criminal activity directly.

Seemingly demonstrating awareness of the rise in xenophobic attitudes, the government has recently worked against the production of negative images. First, on the official plane, the government has worked to prevent the automatic conflation of ethnicity with criminality. As early as in December 2012, Putin claimed that he endorsed a legislative initiative proposed by the Moscow City Duma to ban the media from referring to the national origin or religious affiliation of those taken in custody, arrested or convicted. Putin argued: 'Criminals do not have nationality. <...>What difference does the ethnic group of a person who violated the law make?' He added that 'It is necessary for this legislative initiative to pass through the relevant formal procedures. I do not want to intervene, but if a final version of the law, accepted by the State Duma, reaches me, I am likely to support it' [Interfax, 2012]. While laudable in its own right, the fact that such a bill was not enthusiastically supported earlier is concerning.

A similar legislative initiative had, in fact, been first proposed by the 'United Russia' faction of the Moscow City Duma in September 2006. At the time, the legislators claimed that due to the law, 'journalists will not be involved in unintentionally constructing an enemy image of immigrants' [SOVA, 2006a]. Further, the City Duma's speaker, Vladimir Platonov, emphasized that there is not any connection between nationality and crime, claiming that references to particular ethnic groups in the media actually provokes ethnic/national hatred and hostility towards them [SOVA, 2006b]. There was thus at least tacit recognition at the administrative level that the association of minorities with criminal actions was creating a hostile environment. The lack of regime support for such an uncontroversial bill suggests that tackling xenophobia was not a prime concern for the regime, despite its very notable position in contemporary Russian life.

Further, the authorities have sometimes sought to legitimize their actions through appeal to this very criminal image. Such images were present once again in the authorities' reaction to the *Matveevskii* market affair in 2013. The open-air *Matveevskii* market in Moscow saw North Caucasian migrants beat a police officer to death when he came to arrest a Dagestani man accused of raping a 15-year old girl. The attack allegedly exposed some of the connections between organized ethnic criminal gangs and the au-

thorities, as the officer's colleagues did nothing when the merchants began their bloody assault. Just as interesting, however, was the Russian authorities' reaction to the events, namely to investigate criminal links between the police and migrant traders while simultaneously denouncing an inherent connection between migrants and crime.

To quote Putin's press secretary Dmitry Peskov 'there's only one relevant dimension here: The presence or absence of crime. If there is a crime, the ethnic identity of the perpetrator doesn't matter. It is obvious — and the President has mentioned this — that ethnic crime does not exist' [Samarina, 2013]. On the one hand Peskov's statements can be understood as tacit recognition that such talk of criminality contributes to generating ethnic violence (which is presumably why he downplays it). On the other, the active involvement of senior Russian officials in de-emphasizing the ethnic identity of criminals marks an approach which had, at least officially, become more common after 2010. Was there a corresponding decline in the popular portrayal of ethnically different migrants?

Methodology

To evaluate whether there had been a change in the association of ethnic minorities with crime in the mass media, we performed a content analysis of the Russian print media. As a database we used the newspapers sub-corpus of the *Russian National Corpus* [www.ruscorpora.ru] which is a reference system based on an electronic collection of texts in Russian. The National Corpus is created specifically for academic research and has two benefits which make it ideal for this enterprise. First, it is representative of actual newspapers in Russian society. Second, the corpus contains additional information on the properties of included texts. The newspaper sub-corpus began in the 2000s and contains 433,373 text items. It is represented by seven media resources: four print newspapers (*Izvestiya*, *Sovetskyi Sport*, *Trud*, and *Komsomolskaya Pravda*) and three electronic resources (*RIA-Novosti*, *RBK*, and *Novyi Region*). Unfortunately, at the time frame of our research, the database only possessed data up to 2014, but we judged this sufficient to evaluate the role of the media in the formation of particular stereotypes. Such a wide array of texts and resources thus constitutes a comprehensive sample of the media over this time period. The dataset for each year contained approximately the same number of text items (apart from 2014). We

examined 45,363 documents in 2008; 43, 667 in 2009; 43,947 in 2010; 39,107 in 2011; 37,172 in 2012; 34,026 in 2013; and 10,417 in 2014.

Results and Discussion

Table 1 shows that between 2008 and 2011 the media demonstrated a stable interest in the issue of migration, but in 2012 it began increasing rapidly and in 2013 displayed about 3 percent (1,091 text items) out of all pieces of media texts in the National Corpus (more than one and a half the corresponding figure for the preceding year). At the same time, for the naming of migrants the number of terms with a neutral connotation is higher than the number of terms which give migrants a derogatory connotation, and even more so — with a negative one (see Table 1).

Table 1

The naming of migrants in text items, 2008–2014

Year	Neutral connotation		Derogatory connotation		Negative connotation	
	Migrant (s)		Gastarbeiter (s)		Illegal (s)	
	%	N (text items)	%	N (text items)	%	N (text items)
2008	.44	196	.35	157	.14	63
2009	.56	244	.38	165	.18	78
2010	.42	182	.30	128	.23	99
2011	.51	199	.38	147	.23	88
2012	.85	316	.55	204	.29	108
2013	1.87	635	.81	273	.54	183
2014	1.34	139	.44	45	.33	34

The number of textual items related to the ethnicity of internal and foreign migrants also demonstrates an interesting pattern: if until 2009–2010 migrants from Central Asia — Tajikistan and Uzbekistan (external migrants) were mentioned more often than migrants from Caucasus (internal migrants), in 2010–2011 this trend changed as issues related to migrants from the Caucasus stepped forward in the media (see Table 2). In 2013, however, both internal (Caucasian) and external (Central Asian) migrants were approximately equally likely subjects of discussion. So, in 2013, the media covered

the Caucasians in 151 articles (three times more than in 2008); Tajiks in 140 articles (approximately two times more than in 2008); and, the Uzbeks in 111 pieces of news (also twice as many as five years before). Far from a decline in the image of the migrant in the press, then, their number increased.

Table 2

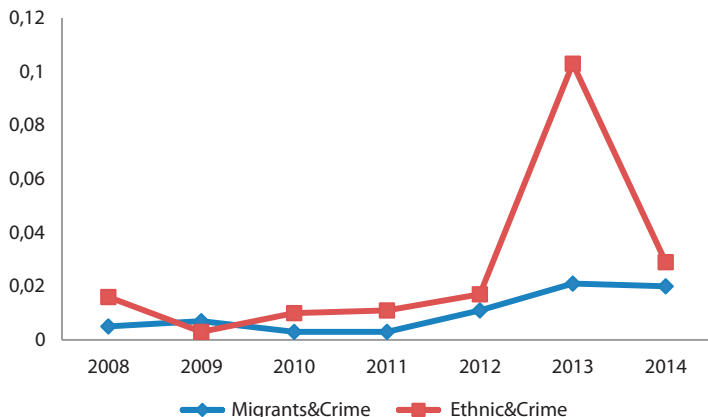
Textual references to the ethnicity of migrants, 2008–2014

Year	Internal migrants		Foreign migrants			
	Caucasians		Tajiks		Uzbeks	
	%	N (text items)	%	N (text items)	%	N (text items)
2008	.11	48	.15	65	.13	55
2009	.08	32	.14	61	.12	50
2010	.23	99	.12	51	.30	129
2011	.29	113	.22	84	.12	44
2012	.28	104	.27	99	.16	58
2013	.45	151	.42	140	.33	111
2014	.18	18	.23	24	.12	12

While the number of media articles involving discussion of ethnic migrants increased, however, there was not a corresponding increase in the number of accusations of criminal activity associated with ethnic minorities. In other words, the concentrated poison of ethnic criminality was dissolved in a larger pool of neutral references. Thus, the overall impression created by the media is one of a relative decline over time of the stereotypes purported to generate violence.

The sole spike in the data, as Table 2 demonstrates, came after 2012 and reached its peak in 2013, the year of the Mayor of Moscow election. As mentioned above, one of the salient features of the mayoral campaign was that four out of six candidates (Sobyanin, Yavlinsky, Naval'nyi, and Mel'nikov) focused on the issue of legal and illegal migration to Moscow. All included measures to combat illegal migration in their electoral programs [Moskva24, 2013]. For example, Naval'nyi who has been periodically criticized by the liberal community of Russia for making overtures to nationalism, said in one of his interviews on the sole liberal television station, *Dozhd TV*: 'We have an immense problem with migrants in Moscow and we will never solve it if we do

not establish a visa regime with countries of Central Asia and Transcaucasia' [Osharov, 2013]. Moreover, Naval'nyi stated that more than half of the crimes were committed by migrants from Central Asia and in case he would win, he would decrease the number of migrants in Moscow by 70 percent [Ibid.].



Graph 1. Textual references to “migrants & crime” and “ethnic & crime”, 2008–2014

This section has provided evidence of both official and popular disassociations with the idea of ‘ethnic criminality’ in the period after 2010. On the official level, although senior politicians have publicly rebuked connections between migrants and crime, it took until 2012 for them to do so. This was despite opportunities to dissociate migrants and crime at the height of the skinhead wave of violence. On the popular level, the association between ethnicity and criminality has also declined, even though references to ethnic groups and migrants increased over the same period. The evidence thus suggests that while state entities were working on cure, they also sought to prescribe remedies to the disease in the first place.

Conclusion

Thus, the article offers reflections on the role of the media in generating anti-migrant sentiment. Within the Russian print media, attitudes towards ethnic migrants are divided because they reflect the assessment of different aspects of the migrants’ culture. Employers mainly assess the qualities of migrants in terms of a *labor culture*, emphasizing such things as their

promptness and modest demands. Businesses are interested in financial gain, so they hire low-paid migrants and provide a liberal assessment in the migration discourse. For locals (and journalists reflecting their viewpoint), however, the *public behavior* of migrants is important. If migrants display patterns of behavior very different from those habitual in society it tends to provoke negative attitudes to migrants and a conservative contribution to the discourse. The authorities are mainly interested in maintaining stability, so they do not articulate their stand on the migration issue precisely. The net result is to produce an ambivalent attitude to ethnic migrants, but one which after 2010 downplayed the earlier purported connection between migrants and crime. This implies that while negative attitudes toward ethnic others and migrants continue, so hate crimes may reappear as a significant feature of Russian society at some point in the future.

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