

Transnational Exchange VI, Workshop 4: Voluntary return to Russian Federation

Date: 05. – 07. November 2024

Location: Augsburg, Germany

Organizers: Salomé Maxeiner, Riikka Schenk and Verena Salz, Transnational Exchange VI

Participants: 29 social workers from the AVRR field, from six European countries



Transnational Exchange VI workshop participants listening to the presentation of reintegration partner Inna Airapetian.

Voluntary return to Russian Federation

The workshop, “Voluntary Return to Russian Federation”, took place in Augsburg, Germany, from November 5th to 7th, 2024. The event brought together experts and practitioners to learn and discuss the complexities of assisted voluntary return and reintegration. Through a series of insightful presentations and working groups, participants gained a deeper understanding of the socio-political, economic, and cultural factors influencing the reintegration of returnees to Russia, with a particular focus on the North Caucasus region.

The workshop featured three distinguished speakers: psychologist and rehabilitation trainer Inna Airapetian from Resource Center “Steps” in Armenia, Dr. Helena Holzberger from LMU Munich, and Dr. Fabian Burkhardt from Leibniz Institute for East and Southeast European Studies. This report summarises key insights from the workshop, beginning with an exploration of reintegration programs in Chechnya and extending to broader discussions on Russia’s historical and contemporary socio-political landscape.

Reintegration Program for Returning Families to the Chechen Republic, Russia

The keynote speaker at Transnational Exchange VI workshop “Voluntary return to Russian Federation” was psychologist and rehabilitation trainer Inna Airapetian. She was the head of Chechen NGO “Sintem” from 2005 to 2021 and has continued her work at NGO Resource Center “Steps” in Armenia. Mrs. Airapetian provided the workshop participants first-hand information and experiences on reintegration projects in Chechnya and on reintegration challenges like alcoholism.

Background on the Chechen Republic

The Chechen Republic, located in the North Caucasus region of Russia, shares borders with Dagestan, Stavropol Territory, North Ossetia, and Ingushetia. The majority of the population, around 95%, are ethnic Chechens, with smaller communities of Russians, Kumyks, Avars, and Ingush. The region is culturally distinct, with Chechen as the primary language, while Russian is also widely spoken. Sunni Islam is the dominant religion, and the main industries include oil and gas, agriculture, and construction.

The region has experienced significant demographic changes due to historical events, migration trends, and conflicts, particularly in the 1990s and early 2000s, leading to widespread displacement and emigration.

Migration Trends in the Chechen Republic

Migration has played a crucial role in shaping the Chechen Republic’s demographic and socio-economic landscape. Key trends include:

1. Internal Migration

- **Post-War Migration:** The return of refugees and movement from rural areas to cities has been a prominent trend following the conflicts.
- Current trends include migration for work and education, with many young people seeking better opportunities in urban centers.

2. External Migration

- **Emigration:** A significant number of Chechens emigrated to Europe due to conflicts, seeking safety and stability. Major destinations include Germany, France, Austria, Belgium, and Poland.
- **Immigration:** The region has also seen a limited inflow of immigrants and labor migrants, although the numbers remain relatively small.

Chechen diaspora communities in Europe have grown significantly, with Germany hosting around 40,000 Chechens, France approximately 30,000, Austria 25,000, and smaller populations in Belgium and Poland. Reasons for migration include seeking refuge from conflict, family reunification, better living conditions, and escaping violence and persecution, including gender-based violence and religious discrimination.

The Role of "Sintem" and the Resource Centre "Steps"

The Chechen NGO "Sintem," operating from 2005 to 2021, has been instrumental in addressing social challenges in the region, particularly those affecting individuals impacted by war and displacement. Inna Airapetian has been a key figure in these efforts. She has led programs for the reintegration of families returning from Europe since 2014 and authored initiatives focused on children's integration.

The NGO Sintem's mission revolved around:

- Capacity building and the protection of rights
- Promoting critical thinking and awareness
- Collaborating with partner organizations
- Providing direct assistance, including psychological support, legal advice, and help with mental stability
- Fostering peace and conflict-resolution skills

From 2021, the NGO Resource Center "Steps," a subsidiary of Sintem, has continued this work under Airapetian's mentorship, emphasizing the reintegration of returnee families into a post-conflict society.

Support Initiatives for Returning Families

The reintegration of Chechen families from Europe, particularly from Belgium, is a multi-layered process involving collaboration with international organizations like Fedasil, Caritas International Belgium, and AMIF. These partnerships have facilitated a range of support measures, which include:

1. Housing Support: Assistance with housing, repairs, and rehabilitating homes for returnees.
2. Economic Support: Grants, subsidies for small business development, training programs, and employment assistance, including incentives for employers who hire returning migrants.
3. Social Support: Access to healthcare, psychological counseling, and educational support for children, including supplementary classes and courses to aid their integration.
4. Administrative and Legal Assistance: Help in retrieving essential documents, navigating bureaucratic processes, and resolving administrative issues.



Inna Airapetian, Mentor in Reintegration Services, NGO Resource Center "Steps"

Specific Projects and Assistance Provided

The "Return" project in Chechnya offers tailored support to returnees, including:

- Psychological consultations (both individual and group)

- Business support: guidance in business planning, risk management, and ongoing mentorship until the business becomes self-sustaining
- Connection to partner NGOs or government programs for additional support
- Social and legal consultations
- Grants for medical care or housing needs
- Provision of temporary crisis housing for those in urgent situations
- Family counseling to address crises, conflicts, and challenges with children
- Training in skills related to social project management
- Special programs for children to facilitate their social and educational integration

Challenges Faced by Returnees

Families returning to Chechnya face a variety of obstacles, including:

- Economic Issues: High unemployment, lack of housing, and poor living conditions.
- Legal and Bureaucratic Hurdles: Difficulties in property registration, lost documentation, and legal barriers.
- Social and Psychological Challenges: Post-traumatic stress, social isolation, discrimination, and the breakdown of family ties.
- Political and Security Concerns: Suppression of dissent, restrictive legislation, and ongoing socio-political tensions that impact freedoms.

These challenges underscore the need for comprehensive and continuous support to ensure successful reintegration. The contributions of organizations like Sintem and Steps and individuals such as Inna Airapetian have been pivotal in providing this support, fostering resilience and rebuilding lives in a post-conflict setting. Their work, backed by international partnerships, offers a model for reintegration initiatives that prioritize the well-being and long-term stability of returnee families, ensuring they can reintegrate into society with dignity and hope.



Dr. Helena Holzberger, Post-Doc Research Assistant, Ludwig-Maximilians-University Munich

General overview of Russian Federation with a special focus on Caucasus

Dr. Helena Holzberger, Post-Doc Research Assistant at LMU Munich, gave a presentation about the historical, cultural, and socio-political dynamics of Russia, highlighting the complex narratives surrounding voluntary return migration. Through a detailed exploration of Russia's historical transformation, migration trends, and contemporary political landscape, her presentation aimed to provide insights into the motivations and challenges faced by those considering returning to Russia.

Historical and Cultural Foundations of the Russian Empire

Dr. Holzberger began by offering a comprehensive overview of Russia's development from a medieval state to a formidable multi-ethnic empire. The roots of modern Russia trace back to the reign of Ivan IV, known as Ivan the Terrible. In 1547, Ivan crowned himself "Tsar and Autocrat of All the Russias," asserting a claim to the Byzantine imperial legacy. His rule marked significant territorial expansion, particularly toward the east and south, driven by imperial ambitions.

Peter the Great's era (1672–1725) represented a pivotal chapter in Russian history. Determined to modernize Russia along Western lines, Peter undertook sweeping reforms. He established a powerful navy, restructured the military, and introduced Western practices in governance and trade. His policies fostered economic growth and intellectual exchange but also deepened societal divisions. The rural peasantry, untouched by these reforms, remained tethered to traditional ways of life, creating a stark contrast between the modernized elite and the broader population.

Migration and Socio-Political Changes in the Soviet Era

The presentation then shifted to the Soviet era, emphasizing the profound impact of political upheavals on migration patterns. The aftermath of the 1917 Russian Revolution triggered a massive exodus of intellectuals, nobility, and political dissidents. By the 1920s, Berlin had emerged as a vibrant cultural hub for Russian émigrés, hosting a thriving community of artists, writers, and intellectuals.

The Soviet regime, particularly under Stalin, implemented policies that dramatically reshaped the country's demographic landscape. The forced collectivization of agriculture and widespread political repression led to significant population displacements. Entire ethnic groups, including Germans and Koreans, were deported to remote regions. Despite these challenges, the Soviet Union also attracted labor migrants, contributing to its industrialization drive in the 1920s and 1930s.

The 1980s brought a wave of reforms under Mikhail Gorbachev, whose policies of glasnost (openness) and perestroika (restructuring) sought to democratize the Soviet system. These reforms relaxed censorship, allowed public criticism, and promoted political transparency. However, they also set the stage for the Soviet Union's eventual collapse in 1991, leading to the emergence of 15 new independent states.

Post-Soviet Challenges and Migration Dynamics

The post-Soviet period was marked by significant socio-economic challenges. The transition to a market economy under Boris Yeltsin resulted in hyperinflation and social inequality. Privatization created a new class of wealthy elites, while the majority of the population faced declining living standards. Internal migration trends reflected the urbanization push, as millions moved from rural areas to cities in search of better opportunities.

Simultaneously, waves of emigration from Russia increased. Jews, Germans, and Armenians, among others, sought to leave the country, driven by both economic factors and political uncertainty. Countries such as Germany, the United States, and Israel became primary destinations for these emigrants.

The Rise of Putin and the Shift Toward Authoritarianism

A significant part of the presentation focused on Vladimir Putin's rise to power and the subsequent political shifts in Russia. After Boris Yeltsin's resignation in 1999, Putin assumed the presidency, quickly consolidating power. His administration curtailed media freedom, repressed political opposition, and promoted a nationalist narrative that emphasized Russia's imperial legacy and traditional values.

The introduction of laws targeting non-governmental organizations (NGOs), particularly the "Foreign Agents" law, signaled a broader crackdown on dissent. NGOs receiving foreign funding were subjected to stringent regulations, effectively stifling their activities. This era also witnessed the suppression of independent media and the persecution of journalists critical of the government.

Putin's domestic policies were accompanied by an increasingly assertive foreign policy. The annexation of Crimea in 2014 and subsequent military interventions in Ukraine highlighted Russia's return to a great-power strategy rooted in force rather than diplomacy.

Contemporary Migration Trends and Challenges

The ongoing conflict in Ukraine has prompted a new wave of migration, with many Russians seeking refuge in countries like Germany. Dr. Holzberger highlighted the struggles faced by these emigrants, including bureaucratic hurdles, language barriers, and difficulties in securing housing and employment. The psychological toll of displacement and concerns for family members left behind in Russia further complicate their integration.

Two case studies illustrated these challenges. One involved an activist and teacher from St. Petersburg who fled to Tbilisi and later sought asylum in Germany. The other focused on a historian who transitioned from academia to industry after relocating to Germany. Both cases underscored the precariousness of life for Russian emigrants navigating new environments. Dr. Holzberger emphasized the need for comprehensive support systems that address the unique challenges faced by Russian emigrants. This includes language training, employment assistance, and mental health support. Additionally, fostering a greater understanding of the political context in Russia is crucial for developing effective reintegration programs.



Dr. Fabian Burkhardt, Research Associate, Leibniz Institute for East and Southeast European Studies

Current Political, Financial, and Security Situation in the Russian Federation

In his presentation, “Current Political, Financial, and Security Situation in the Russian Federation”, Dr. Fabian Burkhardt led an in-depth analysis of Russia’s evolving political landscape, its transition to a war economy, demographic trends, and the challenges facing both the state and its citizens. The presentation provided critical insights into the dynamics shaping Russia in the wake of recent global developments and internal policy shifts.

Regime Classification and Political Dynamics

Dr. Burkhardt opened with a discussion on Russia’s authoritarian regime, categorizing it as a hybrid system characterized by elements of autocratization and personalization of power. The current regime operates as a “personalistic” system, where decision-making is heavily centralized around President Vladimir Putin. This personalist nature ensures that informal networks and patronage dominate, with power and resources distributed through a patronal framework. Formal institutions exist but are often undermined by these informal mechanisms.

The presentation also highlighted the concept of electoral authoritarianism, where elections are held but lack genuine competitiveness. These elections, sometimes plebiscitary in nature, serve more to legitimize the regime than to reflect true democratic choice.

Economic Transition: From State Capitalism to War Economy

A large part of the presentation focused on Russia's economic trajectory. Dr. Burkhardt emphasized how the state has increasingly asserted control over key sectors, evolving from a system of state capitalism to a war economy. State-owned enterprises and companies with close ties to political power dominate the landscape. This "crony capitalism" ensures that access to contracts and property rights is contingent upon proximity to the regime.

The Russian economy relies heavily on resource wealth, particularly oil and gas. High commodity prices have historically provided financial stability, enriching elites and funding social transfers. However, the economic benefits are unevenly distributed, contributing to significant inequality. The centralization of economic control has also led to fiscal dependence on Moscow, with regional economies tethered to federal transfers.

Federalism and Regional Control

Dr. Burkhardt discussed the erosion of federalist principles in Russia. The central government has systematically undermined regional autonomy through administrative and fiscal centralization. Key appointments, including governors and judges, are tightly controlled by the federal center, reducing the influence of local elites. This consolidation of power has diminished cultural and linguistic diversity in the regions, reinforcing the dominance of the central government.

Despite this centralization, there is little likelihood of Russia's disintegration. The lack of a strong ethnic basis for independence movements, coupled with the integration of regional elites into the federal power structure, mitigates the risk of fragmentation. Dr. Burkhardt suggested that a more plausible scenario would involve a re-federalization or decentralization process rather than outright disintegration.

Demographic Trends and Labor Dynamics

The presentation of Dr. Burkhardt highlighted Russia's ongoing demographic challenges. Since 1991, the country has experienced a significant population decline, losing approximately 15.9 million people. The primary drivers of this decline include low birth rates, high mortality rates, and emigration. Labor immigration, primarily from Central Asia, has offset some of these losses but has not been sufficient to reverse the overall trend.

Demographic decline has also contributed to a labor shortage, exacerbated by factors such as conscription and emigration.

Social Inequality and Military Recruitment

Another critical topic was the socio-economic inequality that persists across Russia. Dr. Burkhardt highlighted the disproportionate impact of military conscription on ethnic minorities and economically disadvantaged regions. One-off payments and benefits for contract soldiers serve as incentives for enlistment, particularly in poorer areas. However, the long-term sustainability of these measures remains uncertain.

The presentation also explored the biopolitical strategies employed by the state, which likes to emphasize traditional family values and promote pro-natalist policies. Efforts to increase birth rates include measures to discourage abortion and support for large families, often framed within a nationalist and Orthodox Christian context.

Public Sentiment and Protest Dynamics

Dr. Burkhardt analyzed the limited scope of protest movements in Russia, attributing the lack of widespread dissent to several factors. Repressive measures, the co-optation of civil society, and the fragmentation of opposition groups have curtailed large-scale protests. However, localized and thematic protests persist, reflecting pockets of resistance within the broader authoritarian framework.

Despite the challenges, creative forms of protest and decentralized networks continue to emerge, particularly among feminist and anti-war activists. Dr. Burkhardt emphasized the importance of understanding these dynamics to assess the potential for political change.



The workshop participants

Economic Challenges and Inflation

Economic instability, marked by rising inflation and housing costs, was another focal point. Dr. Burkhardt provided data on food inflation and rental price increases across major cities, illustrating the financial pressures faced by ordinary Russians. While real wages have seen some growth since 2022, the long-term outlook remains uncertain, given the broader economic challenges. The presentation concluded with a discussion on the future of Russia's political and economic landscape. Dr. Burkhardt emphasized that while the regime remains resilient, the potential for turbulence and regional crises persists. The state's increasing control over the economy and society, coupled with demographic and economic challenges, will shape Russia's trajectory in the coming years.



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