Refugees in Russia

A report to mark Refugee Day 2021

This report looks at the situation of refugees in Russia, some statistics, and how asylum seekers live.

The legal stuff


The UNHCR has had a representation in Russia since 1992, working mainly in Moscow and St Petersburg and the areas around these cities, but extending its activities to other regions through a network of partners such as local organisations like the Children’s Fund of North Ossetia, and international ones such as the Danish Red Cross.

Russia differentiates between recognised refugees, holders of temporary asylum, and forced migrants:

- **Recognised refugees**: In 2020, the Russian Migration Service recognised as refugees only 28 people – only five more than in 2019. The total number of refugees with legal status decreased over 2020, to 445 as opposed to 487 in 2019.

- **Holders of temporary asylum** (a humanitarian status valid for only one year, with a very complicated extension process): 19,817 people hold temporary asylum status, although in 2019 there were nearly 42,000 such people. This decrease is thought to be due to many Ukrainian citizens having gained Russian citizenship during 2020.

- **Forced migrants** (those who were forced to move to Russia for economic reasons after the fall of the Soviet Union): In 2020, the number with this status was more than halved — from 5,323 to 2,512 persons.

Illustration by Natalia Yamshchikova from the Civic Assistance Committee website https://refugee.ru
Undocumented migrants

It is believed that there are many thousands of migrants in Russia who have no official status. They arrive from different countries and for a variety of reasons.

For example around 70,000 people were brought to work on structures for the Sochi Olympics and the FIFA World Cup. They reportedly worked under dreadful conditions and did not receive pay, and were unable to pay for their journey home.

Thousands of Africans came to Russia during the World Cup on a “Fan-ID” which allowed them to bypass the usual visa requirements. Many believed that they would be able to remain either by finding work or by seeking asylum. In the event, these hopes proved to be unfounded and they are now living clandestinely and in fear.

Trafficking

Trafficking is a serious problem. In a report in 2018, the UNHCR stated that the Russian Federation did not fully meet the minimum standards for the elimination of trafficking and was not making significant efforts to do so.

Although the government identified only 20 trafficking victims in 2017, one NGO reported assisting approximately 125 victims in that year, and an international organization identified more than 2,400 trafficking cases in Russia from 2015 to 2017.

Sex trafficking was on the increase, although the predominant problem is within the labour market, in industries including construction, manufacturing, logging, agriculture, brick making, textiles, grocery stores, maritime, and domestic service - as well as in forced begging, waste sorting, and street sweeping. The Global Slavery Index believes that around 794,000 victims of trafficking survive in Russia.

Over 2,000 girls and young women have been trafficked from Nigeria by well-organised gangs which promise a (non-existent) job in a supermarket. Others come on falsified student visas – calling into question the procedures by which such visas are issued. A Nigerian living in Russia who campaigns against trafficking has claimed that the trade is organised by Russian government officials, Nigerian authorities, and “madams”.

One documented case tells how a young woman was driven around to work as a prostitute. On one occasion when she refused to cooperate in a flat with eight men, they molested her and threw her from the fourth floor building. She broke her hip, spent two days on a life-support machine, and is now in a wheelchair. She has been fortunate in that she was supported to return to Nigeria.

In 2020 the Nigerian National Agency for the Prohibition of Trafficking in Persons sentenced three family members to ten years in prison for forcing a teenager into prostitution in Russia.

<< Photo: Civic Assistance Committee https://refugee.ru
(above: stock image (c) Fizkes | dreamstime.com)
How asylum-seekers live

According to the Moscow-based Levada Centre, xenophobia and hate crimes are on the rise, with 50% of the population supporting the slogan “Russia for Russians”, and 71% saying that there were too many foreigners in the country.

Before being granted any kind of official status, asylum-seekers have no protection from the state. A network of organisations works with the UNHCR to provide legal support, social counselling, food aid and free health treatment, as well as some limited financial assistance. There is also an education crisis, as it is difficult to access school places.

Undocumented migrants frequently live in cramped conditions, with a dozen people sharing a tiny flat. Sometimes the numbers will include babies and children.

Organisations which help refugees include the Civic Assistance Committee, which has existed now for thirty years. In their 2020 report they note that during lockdown they provided (in the office and online) 1016 legal consultations, 1076 consultations providing medical support, and 34 consultations with a psychologist (resulting in six cases in a referral to a psychiatrist). The Civic Assistance Committee also provided food aid during the pandemic for over 2,200 adults and children in over 630 families, urgent financial help to over 1,200 adults and children in 345 families. On the website of the Civic Assistance Committee https://refugee.ru/en/ you can find a great deal of information about the lives of refugees and migrants, the problems they face and how they survive.

FHM projects with refugees and migrants

Friends House Moscow supports two projects that work with refugees and migrants - especially their children. It's possible that these projects may be affected by recent legislation which introduces the concept of “educational activities” and brings these activities under state control.

The refugee centre in Moscow

We have been supporting the “Kids are Kids” Adaptation Centre for several years now, and have accompanied them in their various moves from one set of premises to another over this period. The programme supports around 100 refugee and migrant children from a variety of places including Africa and the Middle East.

In “normal” times there are activities for pre-school children (30 children in total meet for three hours twice a week); Russian lessons for school pupils (around 50 children who attend three times a week); and a full teaching curriculum for children who are excluded from state education because their parents are not registered with the Moscow authorities (around 15 students who meet for four hours three times a week).

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There are about 70 volunteer teachers and other helpers, and a small number of paid staff. Meals for the children are also provided. Russian lessons are also provided for parents. There are regular art therapy sessions and an Integration via Arts programme; in early spring of 2021, 32 children took part in movement therapy classes.

The formal school work is supplemented by regular visits to parks, museums and exhibitions, and meetings with around 100 Russian children from local schools. During the period of the pandemic most of the lessons were held online but regular face-to-face meetings are gradually resuming and getting back to the “normal” level.

"Equally Diverse"

We are delighted to be funding a project in Kaluga (south-west of Moscow) which supports local schools to work with migrant children and help their integration into the host community.

The programme trains teachers and provides educational resources such as books and board games, all of which helps to speed up the children’s language acquisition and their knowledge of Russian society and culture. Twenty schools in all (of which FHM supports 10) take part in the programme and over 1,000 children have been helped so far.

In the past no extra time or resources were allocated for the support of non-Russian-speaking children, so this is essential work to ensure their successful integration.

The project will be evaluated at the end of the school year: informal feedback from teachers so far is very positive. Work will continue with future cohorts of pupils and there are also plans to introduce the programme in Novosibirsk.

About World Refugee Day

World Refugee Day is an international day designated by the United Nations to honour refugees around the globe. It falls each year on June 20 and celebrates the strength and courage of people who have been forced to flee their home country to escape conflict or persecution. World Refugee Day is an occasion to build empathy and understanding for their plight and to recognize their resilience in rebuilding their lives.

Different countries mark World Refugee Day in different ways, led by governments, local authorities, or NGOs and charities. In the UK, the Refugee Council organises an entire Refugee Week (the theme this year being "We do not walk alone") in which many Quakers are involved.

28th July 2021 marks the 70th anniversary of the UN Refugee Convention.

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