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Institutional cooperation among political competitors?

USSR-Russia joint management of migration

1990-1991

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Over the last thirty years, scholars have mainly emphasized the conflictual nature of the relationship between the Soviet Union and its core Republic, Russia (at the time RSFSR), during Perestroika, in the second half of the eighties. The competition between the Union's and Russia's political centers – and above all between their respective leaders Mikhail Gorbachev and Boris Yeltsin – is generally identified as one of the main causes for the dissolution of the USSR in December 1991.¹

While accurate at the political level, the competition narrative fails, however, to account for the parallel evolution of USSR-Russia relations at the institutional one in the years preceding the Soviet disintegration. It notably overshadows the fact that, while claiming sovereignty on the one hand, Russia also had, on the other hand, a strong interest in cooperating - and indeed *cooperated* - with the USSR at the local level in trying to handle the ongoing deep economic, social, and territorial crisis affecting the country as a whole.

The management of interethnic conflicts and unprecedented spontaneous internal migration is a case in point.

Since 1986, reforms introduced by the newly-nominated General Secretary of the Communist Party Mikhail Gorbachev and the degradation of the economic situation made emerge

¹ See, among others, Rudolf Pikhoya, *Sovetskii Soyuz: Istoriya Vlasti 1945-1991* (Novosibirsk: Sibirski Khronograf, 2000); Michael McFaul, *Russia's Unfinished Revolution: Political Change from Gorbachev to Putin* (Ithaca, New York: Cornell University Press, 2001); Ronald Suny, *The Revenge of the Past: Nationalism, Revolution and the Collapse of the Soviet Union* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1993).

ethnonational demands and grievances in several regions of the Union.² Demands that were raised were extremely varied. They ranged from the request of populations that had suffered deportation under Stalin to 'return to their homelands' (as in the case of the Crimean Tatars and the Chechens)³ to claims for the establishment of a national autonomous territory (like the Volga Germans).⁴ Moreover, strong tensions surfaced between nationalist representatives of the so-called 'titular groups'⁵ in the Republics and local ethnic minorities, who feared that Republican independence from the Union might entail strong discrimination and repression against them.

Overall, the new context resulted in a rapid intensification of interethnic issues in several regions of the country. Tensions notably escalated between the Azeri and Armenian population over the disputed territory of the autonomous oblast of Nagorno-Karabakh since 1988; between Georgians and South Ossetians and Abkhazians in Georgia; in the Ferghana Valley in Uzbekistan between Uzbeks and the Meskhetians-Turks minority.⁶

² Whereas most of national issues had existed throughout Soviet history and in imperial times, the increasing loss of grip of the Communist Party over republican leaderships and the local population in the second half of the eighties created the conditions for an unprecedented, and overt, questioning of the existing Soviet federal architecture and interethnic relations. On the national question in the USSR and Soviet Nationalities Policies, Jeremy Smith, *Red Nations. The Nationalities Experience in and after the USSR* (Cambridge, UK and New York: Cambridge University Press, 2013); Dmitry Gorenburg, "Soviet Nationalities Policy and Assimilation," in *Rebounding Identities: The Politics of Identity in Russia and Ukraine* (Washington, D.C.: Woodrow Wilson Center Press; Johns Hopkins University Press, Baltimore, 2006), 273–303. For a detailed reconstruction of the reasons for the emergence of national demands during Perestroika, Gail W. Lapidus, "From Democratization to Disintegration: The Impact of the Perestroika on the National Question," in *From Union to Commonwealth. Nationalism and Separatism in the Soviet Republics* (Cambridge, UK, 1992), 45–70.

³ On the Crimean Tatars and the question of their return, Brian Glyn Williams, *The Crimean Tatars: From Soviet Genocide to Putin's Conquest* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2016). On the Chechen question, among others, the works of the Head of the Department of Anthropology of the Russian Academy of Science and former Minister of Nationalities Affairs (1992) Valery Tishkov, *Chechnya: Life in a War-Torn Society* (Berkeley and Los Angeles, California: University of California Press, 2004) and Anatol Lieven, *Chechnya: Tombstone of Russian Power*. (New Haven & London: Yale University Press, 1999).

⁴ A brief introduction on the German question in the USSR is provided by Gerd Stricker, "Ethnic Germans in Russia and the Former Soviet Union," in *German Minorities in Europe: Ethnic Identity and Cultural Belonging* (Oxford and New York: Berghahn Books, 2000), 165–80.

⁵ Yuri Slezkine, "The USSR as a Communal Apartment, or How a Socialist State Promoted Ethnic Particularism," *Slavic Review* 53, no. 2 (1994): 450. For a detailed description of the premises and functioning of Soviet federal architecture, Terry Martin, *The Affirmative Action Empire. Nations and Nationalism in the Soviet Union 1923-1939* (Ithaca and London: Cornell University Press, 2001); Ronald Suny and Terry Martin, *A State of Nations. Empire and Nation-Making in the Age of Lenin and Stalin* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001).

⁶ For a comprehensive analysis of both the conflict in Nagorno-Karabakh and the one in South Ossetia, see the two works by Thomas de Waal, *Black Garden. Armenia and Azerbaijan through Peace and War* (New York and London: New York University Press, 2003) and the recent de Waal, *The Caucasus. An Introduction* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2019). Another important contribution on the conflicts in South Ossetia, Abkhazia, and Nagorno-Karabakh is provided by Cory Welt, *Explaining Ethnic Conflict in the South Caucasus. Mountainous*

Next to local devastations and deaths, one of the main effects of conflicts, strained interethnic relations, and a critical lack of primary goods, was the spontaneous migration from their original place of residence of thousands of refugees and forced migrants (*bezidentsy i vynuzdennyye pereselentsy*) to escape the war, discrimination, to find a job, or to temporarily settle in another region and wait to be allowed to going back to their 'homelands'.⁷

In the midst of a dramatic social and economic crisis, the massive arrival of refugees represented for the local authorities of the recipient regions an unsustainable pressure and, as such, a reason for strong concerns within the Union's government. Indeed, there was a widespread fear that tensions between the local population and refugees over places of residences, jobs, and food provisions, might end up triggering civil conflicts. In 1991, concerns of a bloody and tragic scenario were intensified and justified by the civil war that had erupted in Yugoslavia, which was regularly cited in that period by Soviet politicians to show what should be avoided at any cost.⁸

Among the USSR Republics, concerns of the Soviet government were particularly shared by Russia.

The RSFSR, whose territory corresponded to approximately seventy percent of the entire Union, was by far the main recipient of this flow, first of all because the majority of refugees and forced migrants were directed towards Moscow, at the same time the Union's and Russia's capital.

More generally, the Russian government shared with the Union's one the fear of territorial disintegration and the potential large-scale consequences of interethnic tensions, especially in the Caucasus. One of the key reasons for that was that the great majority of national and sovereignty demands in the Union emerged within the RSFSR, whose sub-federal entities were disproportionately more numerous than in all other USSR Republics.

Thus considered, it appears clear why, notwithstanding Yeltsin's initiatives to affirm the sovereignty of the Republic, Russia had a strong interest in avoiding, or at least limiting and

Karabakh, Abkhazia, and South Ossetia, Ph.D. Diss (Massachusetts Institute of Technology, 2004). Other major conflicts erupted in Moldova and Tajikistan (Dov Lynch, *Russian Peacekeeping Strategies in the CIS. The Cases of Moldova, Georgia and Tajikistan* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2000).

⁷ A background on the question is provided in the first chapter of Oxana Shevel, *Migration, Refugee Policy, and State Building in Post-Communist Europe* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2011), 1–18. Delia Rahmonova-Schwartz, "Migrations during the Soviet Period and in the Early Years of the USSR's Dissolution: A Focus on Central Asia," *Revue Européenne Des Migrations Internationales* 26, no. 3 (2010): 9–30.

⁸ As for example, by a Deputy USSR Foreign Minister in December 1991 addressed to Gorbachev. In Gorbachev Foundation, Fond. 5, op. 1, d. 10866, *Analiticheskaya zapiska 'Neizbezhnoe i neobkhodimoe' o perspektivakh soyuznogo gosudarstva i vozmozhoi otstavke Prezidenta SSSR*, not later than 13 December 1991, 1–4.

control, the arrival of migrants in the RSFSR regions bordering other Republics as well as in Moscow. In case of violent secession from the Union or territorial disintegration, the most important risk for the RSFSR was a massive, and dangerously rapid, migration towards the RSFSR of Russians who were suffering discrimination in the other Republics, and whose number exceeded twenty-five millions of people.⁹

The article deals with Russia's concerns over, and management of, some key migration issues in 1990-1991. It builds on a rich, entirely new, and unpublished collection of archival documents collected at the State Archive of the Russian Federation (GARF) in Moscow coming from the RSFSR Committee on Nationalities Affairs (which was established in 1990) and future Russian Ministry of Nationalities.

These sources provide important insights into the perceptions, data available, and concrete initiatives of the government to handle migration-related issues questions. They notably help to answer the following questions: how did the Russian government characterize the problem of migration towards the RSFSR in 1990-1991? Which were the bodies dealing with migration-related issues, and how did they coordinate their activities with Soviet ones? How did political conflicts impact on the local management of migration issues?

Coherently, the aim of the paper is three-fold.

First, the article unveils the existence of a fundamental coincidence of interests and concerns in the management of migration between the Russian government and the Union's one.

As such, it stresses the existence of a divarication, in a period of great institutional crisis and uncertainty, between a political conflict at the central level and daily cooperation between Union's and Russia's institutions in those years at the local one.

Second, it sheds light on the newly-established Russian bodies and the way new structures interacted with old Soviet ones. In so doing, it contributes to overcoming the binary idea of a Soviet state opposed to a Russian one - of an 'old' against the 'new'. More in depth, it provides a more complex understanding of the contingent dynamics, in a moment of crisis, that led to the emergence of a Russian statehood well before the end of the USSR, and not merely in opposition to it.

Third, the article argues that the political conflict at the central level had indeed an impact, mostly indirect, on concrete migration management.

The article is divided into two main parts. In the first part, the paper deals with the establishment of the Committee of Nationalities Affairs (*Gosudarstvennyi Komitet po Delam*

⁹ On the problem of the Russian communities abroad, Igor Zevelev, *Russia and Its New Diasporas* (Washington, D.C.: United State Institute of Peace Press, 2001).

Natsional'nostei, further on *Goskomnats*) and the main concerns it expressed, providing detailed data, over migration towards some of the Russian regions. In a second part, the work unveils, and explains, some of the ways in which the Union's and Russia's governments cooperated to manage migration, as well as how political conflict between the two centers could impact on migration management.

1. The Committee for Nationalities Affairs and Russia's fears of mass migration

Following the declaration of sovereignty in June 1990, the Russian Republic rapidly moved to build state structures in competition with Soviet ones.¹⁰

In this context, and considering growing interethnic tensions and ethnonational demands within the RSFSR and all over the Soviet Union, a Committee for Nationalities Affairs (*Goskomnats*) was created within the Russian government. Notwithstanding the dissolution of the USSR in 1991, the Goskomnats worked without interruption and became later the Russian Ministry for Nationalities Affairs.¹¹

A governmental branch of the Council of Ministers specifically dealing with national issues represented a novelty not only for Russia but for the USSR in general. Indeed, a similar body had existed only in the aftermath of the Bolshevik Revolution in the form of the People's Commissariat for Nationalities of the RSFSR (*Narkomnats*). Created in 1917, its first and last head had been the future Soviet leader Josip Stalin, who also decided to abolish it in 1924 when the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics was established.¹²

In terms of competences, the Goskomnats did not have a say on the final parliamentary and governmental decisions on nationalities issues. Instead, its tasks during Perestroika included implementing central nationalities policies, assessing the situation on the ground, holding meetings with republican and regional actors, coordinating the center's actions at the local

¹⁰ Pikhoya, *Sovetskii Soyuz: Istoriya Vlasti 1945-1991*; John B. Dunlop, *The Rise of Russia and the Fall of the Soviet Empire* (Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1993); Kotkin, *Armageddon Averted. The Soviet Collapse 1970-2000*; Thomas F. Remington, "The Russian Parliament: Institutional Evolution in a Transitional Regime, 1989-1999." (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2001).

¹¹ For a complete list of changes in the denomination of the Committee, then the Ministry, of Nationalities, <https://ria.ru/20150313/1052460180.html> (last view: 27 March 2018).

¹² The commissariat was abolished in 1924 with the creation of the Soviet Union and its functions were transferred to the Russian Central Executive Committee (VTsIK), which, in turn, was replaced in 1936 by the two chambers of the RSFSR Supreme Soviet. Available at: <https://ria.ru/spravka/20150313/1052460180.html> (last view: 27 March 2018).

level, and finally provide recommendations to the RSFSR authorities on how to deal with national problems in the RSFSR territory.

Since the Goskonnats began to function, the steady growth of migration from Soviet Republics to Russia as well as from one Russian territory to another was an absolute priority and critical issue to handle. According to the RSFSR government, in two years before January 1991 more than 160,000 people had come to Russia having left their permanent residence. In 1991, this process was 'ongoing'.¹³

In the management of recently emerged migration-related issues, the Goskonnats worked in strict contact with the Minister of Labor under the Russian Council of Ministers. More in depth, in trying to deal with the phenomenon of migration, the RSFSR Council of Ministers created with a decree of November 1990 a ministerial committee to 'support refugees and forced migration',¹⁴ which was finally established on February 11, 1991. The Committee was headed by the Deputy Prime Minister Igor Gavrillov and included one member of Goskonnats. At the first meeting, the ministerial committee presented the most recent (and very alarming) migration data available, mostly confirming data provided by the Committee of Nationalities Affairs the month before. Since 1989, the flow of refugees and migrants had reached 150,000 people—of whom 90,000 had come from Azerbaijan—and forecasts talked about a 'possible increase due to the presence of more than 25 million Russians in the Socialist Republics' and 'non-favorable events, which could force a significant part [of the population] to arrive in the RSFSR'.¹⁵ Moreover, and for the same reasons, Russians were being forced to leave their place of residence even within the RSFSR, beginning with the Autonomous Republics of Tuva, in Center-South Siberia, and Chechnya-Ingushetia.¹⁶

The situation the Russian government had to cope with in 1990-1991 resulted from a series of parallel national issues and interethnic tensions that had emerged in different parts of the country, especially in the Caucasus region (both North and South), since 1988.

First of all, the RSFSR was by a large margin the main recipient of people coming from outside its borders, beginning with the Azeri and the Armenian populations. In a letter dated November 1990 and addressed to the president of the RSFSR Council of Ministers, Ivan Silaev,

¹³ GARF, Fond, 10121, op. 1, d. 30, 10.

¹⁴ Decree 'o merakh po okazaniyu pomoshchi bezhentsam i vynuždennym pereselentsam', 22 November 1990 (cited in GARF, Fond, 10121, op. 1, d. 30, 11).

¹⁵ GARF, Fond, 10121, op. 1, d. 30, 13.

¹⁶ Ibid.

the deputy of the RSFSR Supreme Soviet, Veniamin Sokolov, asked the Russian government to help the city of Moscow in dealing with refugees coming from Azerbaijan, mostly Armenians, above all to 'redistribute' them to other republics within the RSFSR.¹⁷ Sokolov followed suit with a communication from the municipal Party Committee (*Gorkom*) of the Odintsovsky district in the western part of Moscow. In the message, the Gorkom complained about 700 refugees living in pensions, who could not be employed in the district, and who needed goods, beginning with food, that were already in very short supply. In the Gorkom's view, the problem was doomed to escalate. These people 'categorically refused' to live in other RSFSR regions and survived thanks to market 'speculations' like the 'sale of clandestine press'. Consequently, the Gorkom asked for immediate emergency measures at the RSFSR Supreme Soviet and the Russian government levels.¹⁸

Next to refugees escaping from wars as well as natural calamities (such as the Armenian victims of the December 1990 earthquake), a report of January 12, 1991 of the office for federal and national relations (*Referentura po voprosam federatsii i natsional'nykh otnoshenii*) of the Council of Ministers synthesized additional urgent interethnic issues the RSFSR was facing and would need to cope with.

A first, potentially dangerous question regarded the 'rehabilitation and return to their homelands of Crimean Tatars, Chechen–Akkinty, and Meskhetian–Turks' (respectively to the Crimean peninsula in Ukraine, to the former Aukhovsky District in Dagestan in the RSFSR, and to Georgia). In addition to demands for rehabilitation, 'Volga Germans, Ingushian, Nogaity, Karachaevy, Cherkessy and other populations' asked for the establishment of ethnic autonomous territories and 'Greeks, Koreans, Kurds, Assiritsy, Vepsy, and other small populations' (*malochislennye narody*) demanded greater cultural and socio-economic status.¹⁹

The consequences of the recently approved legislation on rehabilitation were particularly felt in the southwestern and bordering Russian region of Krasnodar, where, next to tensions between the local population and the Meskhetian–Turks minority, who escaped the civil conflict in Uzbekistan, the situation was 'aggravated by the arrival of a significant number of Crimean Tatars', which saw Krasnodar as a temporary place of residence before being allowed

¹⁷ GARF, Fond, 10121, op. 1, d. 30, 2.

¹⁸ GARF, Fond, 10121, op. 1, d. 30, 3. The government response was to send a delegation of five experts to the Odintsovsky District, assess the situation and act accordingly. GARF, Fond, 10121, op. 1, 4.

¹⁹ Ibid.

to move to the Crimean peninsula. Overall, the situation in Krasnodar created 'big difficulties for them to find jobs as well as to secure food supplies'.²⁰

On the matter, in the spring of 1991, the regional Supreme Soviet of Krasnodar provided to the Goskomnats and the USSR government detailed data on the situation of refugees in the region. According to the document, a high number of refugees (approximately 30,000) were trying 'to settle ethnic colonies' and refused to live together with people of other ethnicities who were coming. Armenians, for example, did not want to live with Azeris and Meskhetian-Turks. Besides, in the neighborhoods with a higher concentration of refugees, house prices 'mounted by ten times'. In addition, there was a critical lack of education structures, material, schools, and teachers with knowledge of the refugees' mother tongues, as well as of doctors and hospitals. Moreover, the local Soviet warned about the negative implications of the ongoing reforms towards a market economy, which would have shrunk jobs in State industry and agriculture. The document also informed about the 'critical lack' of coupons for sugar and other basic goods. In conclusion, the Krasnodar Supreme Soviet asked 'either the USSR or the RSFSR' to allow the local authorities to take autonomous and appropriate measures to manage, and eventually limit, the entry of refugees and handle the problem of redistribution of jobs and houses.²¹ In November 1991, the head of Goskomnats presented the situation of migrants in the Krasnodar region as critical, and noted that the eighty-one percent of the deputy members of the local parliament believed that interethnic relations were doomed to worsen in the near future.²² Were this to remain unsolved, it could spark ethnonational conflicts that could accumulate in the North Caucasus and ultimately evolve into a wider and major regional conflagration.²³

No matter the importance in the short term of non-Russian minorities coming to Russia, in the medium term the Russian government was even more concerned about the fate of the Russian minorities outside the RSFSR and the prospect of millions of Russian-speakers arriving, especially from the Baltics, Moldova, and Ukraine. In 1991, the problem seemed to intensify daily. In June 1991, Goskomnats noted that the arrival of Russians from other republics was 'increasing'.²⁴ Moreover, the Russian and the Soviet governments continued to

²⁰ GARF, Fond, 10121, op. 1, d. 30, 6.

²¹ GARF, Fond, 10121, op. 1, d. 30, 49-54.

²² GARF, F. 10121, op.1, d. 32, 72ob.

²³ GARF, F. 10121, op.1, d. 32, 72ob.

²⁴ GARF, F. 10121, op.1, d. 32, 25-27

receive dozens of letters from members of the Russian minorities outside the RSFSR.²⁵ On the basis of the messages received, according to Goskomnats 'serious concerns' were particularly justified with regard to the Russian minority in Moldova.²⁶

A 1991 government report pointed in particular to the existence of two essential problems and one key dilemma.

For the RSFSR government, the first problematic issue was the risk of a massive arrival of Russians to the RSFSR, which the republic could not absorb, especially in the midst of the ongoing socio-economic crisis and considering the already existing interethnic tensions in the regions bordering other republics. The report notably warned that 'according to the RSFSR Ministry of Labor, there is a distinct possibility of large-scale migration of the Russian-speaking population from the Baltics and other republics of the Soviet Union.' The report also noted the increasing frequency 'in recent times, [of] messages to the RSFSR Council of Ministers of the heads of the oblasts bordering the Baltic countries about territorial claims, and anti-Soviet and anti-Russian propaganda.'²⁷

In other words, growing anti-Russian sentiments, particularly in the Baltics, risked producing a negative impact also within RSFSR territory. In this context, the underlying dilemma of the RSFSR government in 1991 was clear: how to protect Russian-speaking people outside the RSFSR—whose leaders were, in most cases, directly appealing to the Russian authorities for help—while at the same time preventing mass migration of those people to the republic.

In the second half of 1991, internal migration and the question of Russian communities living in the non-Russian republics were a source of major concern not only for the Russian government but for the Union's center, too. In June 1991, the USSR Supreme Soviet asked the RSFSR State Committee of Nationalities (Goskomnats, *see* chapter 4 and 5) to provide a detailed forecast and scenario of the number of refugees that could flee their republics of belonging and emigrate to Russia. According to its assessment, Goskomnats forecasted the possible arrival to Russia of one million people escaping ethnic discrimination or tensions in their regions.²⁸ The Committee provided in particular two scenarios—one more optimistic, the other more negative. In the first case, the number of refugees might reach 500.000 people,

²⁵ GARF, F. 10121, op.1, d. 32, 81.

²⁶ GARF, F. 10121, op.1, d. 32, 25-27

²⁷ GARF, Fond, 10121, op. 1, d. 30, 7.

²⁸ GARF, F. 10121, op.1, d. 32, 24.

while in the worst case scenario, 1.6 million people would arrive, 1 million of whom would be from the Russian communities outside RSFSR borders.²⁹

In late July, V. Gusev, the deputy head of the commission for economic relations among republics—an autonomous formation of the USSR Supreme Soviet—asked Goskonnats to send more information about mass migration that risked unleashing interethnic conflicts in other regions by August 15.³⁰ On August 14, Goskonnats concluded that more than 160,000 refugees had arrived in Russia between 1989 and 1990 and that by April 1991, 156,613 were being hosted.³¹

In the summer and autumn of 1991, one of the most urgent and significant cases were the thousands of people that had fled to Russia from the autonomous oblast of South Ossetia and other regions of Georgia where non-Georgian minorities felt threatened and discriminated against.³² According to a report of the Goskonnats, already by the end of June 1991, 33,960 refugees had arrived from Georgia, mostly women and children (approximately 25,000 out of 33,000), 8,000 of whom were from South Ossetia. The great majority of South Ossetians settled in the bordering RSFSR Republic of North Ossetia. To try to deal with the arrival, a separate ministry of nationalities was created within the Republic of North Ossetia and refugees were provided with 'both material and humanitarian aid', which included 3.8 million rubles from the RSFSR.³³

2. Managing the migration crisis and interethnic conflicts at Russia's borders, 1990-1991

Considering the urgency, number, complexity, difficulty to control, and dramatic potential of all these issues, USSR and RSFSR institutions were forced to cooperate, no matter Russian centrifugal tendencies and political conflicts between the leaderships of the two entities.

Indeed, neither the former nor the latter were proving able to control and handle migration and interethnic conflicts alone. On the Russian side, the Committee for migration of the Minister of Labor noted that until that moment emergency measures had been unable to solve

²⁹ GARF, F. 10121, op.1, d. 32, 25-27

³⁰ GARF, F. 10121, op.1, d. 32, 23.

³¹ GARF, F. 10121, op.1, d. 32, 24.

³² GARF, F. 10121, op. 1, d. 32, 1-4

³³ GARF, F. 10121, op. 1, d. 32, 1.

the migration issue and, in conclusion, asked the Ministry of Labor itself, the Ministry of Nationalities Affairs, the Economic Committee and other bodies to, among other things: 1) make a forecast of migration in 1991; 2) elaborate a model of interrepublican agreement to regulate migration and; 3) accelerate the elaboration of the program '*migratsiya*' regulating the criteria to accept and distribute refugees and migrants, as well as for the creation of new jobs and housing.³⁴

First and foremost, RSFSR did not have fundings to cope with the management of migration, both because of the deep and impending economic crisis affecting the country and the fact that the Union was still in control of the country's central budget. As such, the Union's government regularly provided the RSFSR with money. A notable case in this sense is the handling of the arrival and settlement in the Russian region of North Ossetia of thousands of refugees and migrants coming from South Ossetia (*see* the previous section). In March 1991, tensions between South Ossetians and Georgians in the main city of the oblast, Tskhinvali, and across the territory deteriorated. As a result of violent actions from both the Georgian and South Ossetian sides, dozens of houses were burned, civilians of different nationalities were expelled from their places of permanent residence, and the flow of refugees to the territory of North Ossetia increased sharply. In this context, on March 21, 1991, the USSR Council of Ministers allocated additional resources to help the RSFSR government and the autonomous republic of North Ossetia deal with refugees from South Ossetia who were being 'forced to abandon Georgia'.³⁵

Moreover, North Ossetian authorities proposed, discussed, and negotiated with both Russian and Soviet authorities several solutions to reduce the pressure on their republic. In July 1991, an ad hoc committee of the North Ossetian government worked with the RSFSR deputy minister for Agriculture, M. Abdulbasirov, on the handling of refugees from South Ossetia and finally sent to RSFSR Prime Minister Ivan Silaev a series of recommendations of the commission on how to both help refugees in Russia and create the conditions for their return to Georgia.³⁶

Local authorities requested financial and material support to handle the arrival of existing waves of migrants and to limit further migration. Notably, the ad hoc committee asked for approximately 300 million rubles (which might include not only central funding but 'also

³⁴ GARF, Fond, 10121, op. 1, d. 30, 13-15.

³⁵ GARF, Fond, 10121, op. 1, d. 30, 32-35.

³⁶ GARF, F. 10121, op.1, d. 32, 13.

funds from other regions of Russia') between July and September to reconstruct the region affected by the war 'in order to avoid further arrival of migrants from South Ossetia'. Moreover, the Republic asked for more meat, sugar, wheat and other food provisions due to critical shortages in the places of migrant settlement.³⁷ Furthermore, the committee asked the Russian government to adopt specific legislative measures to legally redistribute migrants across other Russian regions or to repatriate them to the original region or republic.

On August 2, the ad hoc 'USSR inter-departmental commission for the resolution of operative issues' sent the Soviet government a proposal for legislative fix. The proposal was sent to both the USSR and the RSFSR council of ministers as well as Goskomnats for comments. The USSR commission noted that something should be done to solve the 'whole disintegration of the economic complex of the [South Ossetian] Oblast'.³⁸ In the text of the proposals, it was clear that Soviet institutions were actively participating in establishing direct transport and communication connections through Russia, and in collaboration with Russian authorities, to South Ossetia to bypass the Georgian government. In making a point of this collaboration, the committee noted the example of the Soviet Gosbank's assistance in allowing bank offices to function in South Ossetia, with the cash coming directly from the RSFSR.³⁹ In addition, a plan had been elaborated to establish a series of phone lines with South Ossetia through the Russian city of Rostov-on-Don.⁴⁰

A second key reason why Russia needed to coordinate with the Soviet structures was that being the USSR still in existence it could not freely decide over issues like the closing of republican borders to prevent the arrival of refugees without prior agreement from the Union's center. This would have meant - as the Goskomnats observed in March 1991 - violating the USSR constitutional principle of the free circulation of Soviet citizens inside USSR borders.⁴¹

Third, high migration toward the RSFSR in 1991 testified to the fact that—notwithstanding its sovereignty aspirations—an independent Russia could not rid itself (in the way the other Socialist Republics could) of the social and economic burden of the decaying Soviet Union.

³⁷ GARF, F. 10121, op.1, d. 32, 14-20. The document was followed by a detailed list of 'material-technical resources' needed to 'neutralize' the consequences of the conflict, including cement to rebuild roads and tractors.

³⁸ GARF, F. 10121, op.1, d. 32, 33.

³⁹ GARF, F. 10121, op.1, d. 32, 33.

⁴⁰ GARF, F. 10121, op.1, d. 32, 36

⁴¹ On this matter, see the observations of the RSFSR Committee on Nationalities Affairs on March 6, 1991. GARF, Fond, 10121, op. 1, d. 30, 27.

Indeed, as a report from Goskomnats observed, one of the most important reasons that people fled Georgia was that they expected the Russian government would honor their pensions.⁴² In other words, the more centrifugal forces and nationalist movements strengthened in the non-Russian Republics, the more Russia became—in the eyes of several minorities of the other Republics—the de facto successor of the Soviet Union.

On the other hand, the Union's structures too needed the republican ones to control internal and external borders and handle migration problems locally.

The first reason for this was that the USSR was trying, but proving unable, to adapt and renew the approach to, and management of, interethnic issues. On April 5, 1991, for example, the USSR Supreme Soviet commission on nationalities discussed the need to involve scholars and academic experts to ascertain their main positions on the management of ethnic conflicts,⁴³ with the aim of elaborating a 'conception' for the solution of these issues.⁴⁴ The scholar Vilen Ivanov, deputy director of the socio-political institute of the USSR Academy of Sciences, reported about both the situation and options available. According to the institute's research, the primary cause for tensions was the economic situation and the center was proving unable to handle this.

In that context, on April 8, 1991, the chairman of the USSR Soviet of Nationalities,⁴⁵ Rafik Nishanov, wrote to the RSFSR Prime Minister Silaev noting with concern that the USSR Supreme Soviet 'continued to receive information about an extremely acute, critical situation', notably in the region of Krasnodar, and affirming that 'an urgent intervention of the RSFSR government [was] needed'.⁴⁶ Even though the request of the Soviet government was in line with an existing federal organization of powers, it also reflected the dramatic loss of grip and control of the Union's authority over its territories and republics.

Notwithstanding the urgency and interest in solving jointly border and migration issues, in a context of high, extreme institutional uncertainty, the scope and forms of cooperation between the USSR and the newly emerging Russian bodies were far from being clearly defined, and were mostly institutionalized by practices, contingency, and immediate needs. The 1991 RSFSR report on interethnic problems observed, for example, that although ad hoc committees

⁴² GARF, F. 10121, op. 1, d. 32, 2.

⁴³ GARF, F. R-9654, op. 7, d. 1055, 17-26, 32-34ob., 39ob.-41ob., 47ob.-50ob. in Shakhrai, *Raspad SSSR*, 283-300.

⁴⁴ *Ibid.*, 229.

⁴⁵ The Soviet of Nationalities was the second chamber of the Supreme Soviet.

⁴⁶ GARF, Fond, 10121, op. 1, d. 30, 48.

to solve these questions had been established within the USSR Supreme Soviet and the Soviet government, they did not include any members coming from the RSFSR Council of Ministers.⁴⁷ Considering these challenges, the report's conclusion was that for no reason should the RSFSR delay the resolution of issues that 'might lead to the outbreak of interethnic conflicts' and that the Council of Minister should charge the Minister of Labor and the Committee of Nationalities Affairs with preparing and distributing the necessary materials and proposals.⁴⁸

In this context, the overt political competition at the central level between the USSR and RSFSR leaderships could not but be an additional, key impediment to the elaboration of a comprehensive migration and nationalities policy. One of the reasons for this was that local authorities tried in several occasions to exploit the struggle for power in Moscow as well as the temporary absence of a strong center to obtain protection, financial aid, political recognition, greater territorial status, or all of these simultaneously. One of the main instruments of pressure of the local elite was the threat that, were the government to remain passive in front of specific requests, tensions could rapidly transform into a civil war, potentially on a vast scale.

Significant of how local authorities exploited the confusion and competition between the Union's and the Russian center is the case of the Republic Ingushetia, in the RSFSR. On September 4, 1991, an Ingush delegation made up of RSFSR and USSR deputy members addressed a letter to the RSFSR President Yeltsin to obtain permission to separate from the Checheno–Ingushetia Republic and recognition of an independent Ingushetian republic. The letter noted that interethnic tensions had recently grown. As a consequence, it asked the government to remember that 'Ingushians had always promoted the interest of Russia in the North Caucasus' and that 'they wanted to side with Russia and democracy', implicitly siding with RSFSR authorities against Soviet ones. In return for this allegiance, the petitioners demanded that the RSFSR 'solve the question of Ingushian statehood'.⁴⁹

No matter the non systemic organization and management of interethnic conflicts, however, constant contacts and coordination on the matter between the USSR and RSFSR continued throughout the crisis, even after the failed coup of August 1991, which had resulted in the definitive affirmation of Yeltsin's authority and Russia's legitimation over Gorbachev's and the USSR's ones.

⁴⁷ Ibid.

⁴⁸ Ibid.

⁴⁹ Boris Yeltsin Presidential Center, Fond 6, op.1, d. 176, 35-37.

Conclusions

The paper addressed the following questions: how did the Russian government characterize the problem of migration towards the RSFSR in 1990-1991? Which were the bodies dealing with migration-related issues, and how did they coordinate their activities with the Union's ones? How did political conflicts impact on the local management of migration issues?

On the basis of unpublished archival material coming from the RSFSR Committee on Nationalities Affairs, the article has first of all showed that, from its establishment in 1990 until the Soviet dissolution in December 1991, the Russian government looked with growing concerns at the arrival of refugees and forced migrants who escaped civil conflicts, interethnic tensions, and looked for better conditions and jobs. The first part notably showed that, in a moment of deep economic and social crisis, the Committee feared, and forecasted, the arrival, in future months, of a high number of Russians leaving the non-Russian Soviet Republics. In this sense, the Russian government and the Union's one shared fundamentally similar concerns over the management of migration and its potential consequences.

As for the RSFSR bodies dealing with migration issues, the article showed that the Committee of Nationalities Affairs worked in strong cooperation with the Ministry of Labour and that, at the same time, there was constant cooperation with Union's structures and ministries. However, while regular, this cooperation resulted from daily contingency more than from a coordinated policy.

In the second part, the paper provided a series of key examples of how the Russian and the Union's government interacted and worked together to deal with the management of migration in some of the main RSFSR recipient regions. It subsequently unpacked a series of crucial reasons justifying these interactions. Among the main factors, the Russian government lacked fundings that only the Union's government could provide and also needed it to try to handle interethnic tensions directly in the other Socialist Republics. On the other side, the Union's leadership, having increasingly lost control over its territories, urgently needed the RSFSR, beginning with Goskomnats, to provide detailed data on the situation on the ground and dealing locally and fastly with tensions that surfaced.

Finally, the paper showed that the political conflict between the Union and the Russian center had indeed an impact on the management of migration issues. Indeed, republican and local structures could exploit USSR-RSFSR competition and concerns both centers had of the explosion of conflicts and potential territorial disintegration to try to obtain the most from at least one of the two centers.

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