

# After the Biriuliovo pogroms: Moscow's Anti-Immigrant Pogrom and the Economics of Racism

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On October 13<sup>th</sup>, in Biriuliovo, a district in the south of Moscow, a series of events took place that are still the talk of most Russian media. Several thousand local residents and radical right activists held a spontaneous rally demanding “an end to illegal immigration and ethnic crime.” Soon afterwards, hundreds of the rally's participants broke into and vandalized a neighboring fruit and vegetable warehouse, the biggest one in Russia and a major employer of migrant labor. The next day Moscow had already become a site of a full-scale nationalist riot, and images of burnt cars and looted stores kept filling the news programs of all Russian TV channels.

The immediate occasion for these events was the murder of a local resident, the 25-year-old Egor Shcherbankov, which had taken place in Biriuliovo three days earlier. The young man was returning home with his girlfriend, when quarreled with someone his girlfriend described as coming from the Caucasus. In the course of their fight, Shcherbakov received several knife wounds and died on the spot while the murderer escaped. Many local residents believed that the police would try to hush up the whole affair and that the perpetrator would not be found. They saw this event as another instantiation of the crime wave that had swept through Biriuliovo with the high concentration of immigrants working in the vegetable warehouse.

Indeed, Biriuliovo is among the worst Moscow districts. The absence of a metro line (which is scheduled to be extended there only in 2020), the environmental degradation, and the great distance from the center have made it the cheapest neighborhood to find housing in the city. This, in turn, makes it attractive to labor migrants, who often rent apartments where two or three people share one room. Most local residents, who have been unable to move to better parts of Moscow, do not have permanent jobs. Because of Biriuliovo's poor social infrastructure, alcoholism and hard drugs are widespread. In practice, the whole district resembles a ghetto, where migrants and marginalized local residents have been accumulating grievances against each other.

Another important factor activating everyday racism was this summer's Moscow mayoral election campaign. Basing their strategies on sociological surveys, which showed the majority of Muscovites favoring anti-immigrant policies, all major candidates, without exception, from the ruling-party incumbent Sergei Sobianin to the main opposition figure Aleksey Navalny, courted the anti-immigrant vote with frank racist demagoguery. As could be expected, this topic favored the authorities who had the actual resources to act upon their rhetoric. Thus, in August, at the height of the election campaign, the Moscow police conducted several show-raids in Moscow's open-air markets and building sites, arresting “illegals.” Just outside the city, a real concentration camp resembling animal enclosure was erected, where hundreds of people had to wait for their deportations.

Extensively covered in state-controlled media, this campaign against “ethnic crime” provided the main background for the Biriuliovo pogroms. Although Aleksey Navalny tried to outdo his opponents

on this question, offering to introduce visa regime with the former Central Asian and Caucasian republics of the USSR, the main beneficiary of the anti-immigrant campaign has been the authorities, who succeeded in using xenophobia to deflecting public attention from the main social and political issues of the day.

One cannot, of course, say that labor migration in Moscow is a problem invented by crafty politicians. According to various estimates, the city population of 15 million now includes one to two million unregistered labor migrants from the Caucasus, Central and South-East Asia. They are engaged in all sectors of the city's economy: building, housing infrastructure, transport, retail, and whole trade. In fact, today's Moscow is unthinkable without this colossal segment of cheap and dependant labor. Whether legal or illegal, migrants have decidedly fewer rights: at any moment, they can become victim of police arbitrariness, employer non-payment, or the aggressive xenophobia of the local population. Their main line of defense in this situation becomes their ethnic community, whose leaders are not infrequently salesmen of cheap labor connected with organized crime.

The racism that characterizes Moscow society draws distinctions wherever possible: "Russians" hate "blacks"; people from the Caucasus look down on Central Asians. This system of nestling racisms expresses itself economically: the police takes bribes from Caucasian traders, who in turn exploit their own compatriots and Central Asian migrants.

These processes take place in a context in which the Russian government, facing a period of economic stagnation, openly discusses the necessity of deep cuts in the state budget. Not long ago, moreover, in his programmatic article on the current state of Russian economy published in the Russian edition of *Financial Times*, Prime Minister Medvedev called Russian labor productivity too low and incommensurate with the high level of salaries paid in Russia.

The conscious inflaming of hatred against immigrants could prove a successful move in deflecting the public's anger at the state's austerity politics. While destroying the state sector and reducing salaries, elites can always appease the majority with the help of public humiliation of minorities. Precisely such a cynical populist gesture was made after the Biriuliovo pogroms: the vegetable warehouse was closed down, more than 1000 "illegals" were arrested, and Shcherbakov's alleged murderer was found in record time. This man, an unsuccessful fruit salesman from Azerbaijan, was arrested with gratuitous violence before cameras and brought personally to the Minister of Internal Affairs Kolokoltsev. Footage of the roughed up and handcuffed foreign criminal and the imposing head of police were translated on all Russian TV channels, probably giving a minute of vindication to Biriuliovo's ordinary citizens sympathetic to the pogrom.

The tragedy of living in a capitalist state and society lies in the fact that most ordinary people can find themselves in Shcherbakov and his murder's place: the life of the migrant or the Russian worker cost as little as their civic rights. And the judge of that fierce and meaningless struggle between the two will always be the ruling elite, ready to go to any length to perpetuate its domination.

**Ilya Budraitskis**, 28 October 2013

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\* <http://www.criticatac.ro/lefteast/moscows-anti-immigrant-pogrom-and-the-economics-of-racism/>