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A New Chill?

Foreign Scholars and the Russian Visa Question

Are we back in the Cold War? No, we're not. As bad as things may be today between Russia and the West and despite the many pundits who keep telling us that the Cold War is heating up again, the world is no longer divided between ideologically opposed camps mobilized for global conflict. We have not returned to the daily possibility of nuclear Armageddon. The Cold War, in that sense, really is *still* over.

But to hear the rhetoric of the moment, one could be forgiven for feeling a little *déjà vu*. Many of the stark divides between “us” and “them” so familiar from the days of Mutually Assured Destruction have indeed snapped back into place, along with many of the old stereotypes. In fact, given that Western governments and Russia have each been quick to accuse the other of being stuck in a Cold War mindset, this might be one of those cases where everyone is right.¹ The Cold War is over, but Cold War finger pointing lives on.

It is too early to gauge how this bitter atmosphere will affect our field, but there are reasons to be concerned. The much publicized scandal involving the Association for Slavic, East European, and Eurasian Studies (ASEEES) and Stephen Cohen seems to suggest that the heated geopolitical confrontations of the moment are creating new rifts within the scholarly community.² But scholars have been influenced by geopolitics in other ways as well. U.S. specialists in Russian, Eurasian, and East European studies, for example, have been affected in recent years by the U.S. government's cutting of funds to Title VI and Title VIII programs.³ Graduate programs have been hit especially

¹ The idea that we're back to the Cold War even has a Wikipedia page. See “Cold War II” (http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Cold_War_II, all Web addresses accessed 28 April 2015).

² For a summary of the controversy, see Jennifer Schuessler, “Scholars at Odds on Ukraine,” *New York Times*, 29 January 2015, C1 (www.nytimes.com/2015/01/29/arts/scholars-at-odds-on-ukraine.html?_r=1). More information is available on the ASEEES website (www.aseees.org/news-events/aseees-news-feed/aseees-detailed-clarification-regarding-cohen-tucker-fellowship).

³ For a recent summary of the impact of cuts in these federal programs, see Laura L. Adams, “The Crisis of US Funding for Area Studies,” *Newsnet* 53, 2 (2013): 1–4.

hard, resulting in reduced support for M.A. and Ph.D. students wishing to do archival research in former Eastern bloc countries.

Now scholars seem to be coming under pressure from a new direction: increasing visa problems for Western academics seeking to do their work in Russia. The visa issue rarely makes it to the front pages, yet informal conversation in the scholarly community suggests that it is indeed something worthy of attention.

Recent developments are based on laws enacted over the last two decades, albeit laws that were neither widely advertised nor much enforced until recently.⁴ A special visa category for foreigners wishing to visit Russia for scientific, cultural, and humanitarian reasons was created in 1996, called the humanitarian visa (*gumanitarnaia viza*).⁵ It is this visa type, in particular one of its subcategories related to “scientific-technical exchange” (*nauchno-tekhnicheskie sviazi*), that is the most appropriate visa for foreign academics interested in traveling to Russia for research or academic exchange. Visas of this type require a letter of support from a Russian host institution: more often than not, a university, scholarly association, or research institute. The rest of the visa application is then fairly standard.

So far, so good. The problem, however, is that until last year most foreign academics had never heard of the humanitarian visa and, consequently, few of us even knew to apply for one. For years, hundreds if not thousands of us have been traveling to Russia not on humanitarian visas but on much more widely known (and more readily obtainable) tourist or business visas. Having never run into any questions or problems during our visits to the country, we have reasonably assumed that we were not doing anything wrong.

Increasingly, however, the Russian Federal Migration Service (FMS, the old OVIR) and the Federal Security Service (FSB) are enforcing Russian visa regulations with regard to foreign academic visitors, and the result is that more of us are finding ourselves in uncomfortable situations.

On 31 January 2015, in what seems to have been a well-coordinated sting operation, the FMS checked passports at a congress of psychiatrists in St. Petersburg, and a number of participants found themselves fined for

⁴ Lack of enforcement is reflected in the website of the Russian Embassy in Washington, DC, which is quite vague as to what the various visa categories are for (www.russianembassy.org/page/visas).

⁵ See paragraph 25, 6, of “Federal’nyi zakon Rossiiskoi Federatsii ot 15 avgusta 1996 g., no. 114-fz” (www.rg.ru/1996/08/22/vjezd-vyez-dok.html). The category of the humanitarian visa as the appropriate form of visa for scientific and cultural exchange was restated in “Postanovlenie pravitel’sтва Rossiiskoi Federatsii ot 9 iyunia 2003 g., no. 335.” The website of the Russian Embassy in Washington does not make any of this explicit, however.

attending a professional conference on a tourist visa. American journalism professors faced similar problems in St. Petersburg in October 2014.⁶

Historians, too, seem to be drawing attention, including from unexpected visitors in the archives. One such incident happened to a member of our *Kritika* team during a short research trip to Elista, the capital of the Kalmyk Republic, in January of this year. Our colleague was winding up his second day of work in the republican archive when three men suddenly entered the reading room, flashing their badges and snapping pictures of him “in the act” with his 19th-century files. The men—two from the FMS, the other from the FSB—were quick to tell him that he was violating the terms of his tourist visa because “tourists don’t work in archives.”

The agents were polite, even painfully so, but that did not stop them from taking our colleague back to their offices for the rest of the afternoon and asking him a series of questions about his research and travel in the country, many of which had nothing to do with the case at hand but were clearly designed to make him feel “watched” and intimidated. The upshot of the incident: a small fine accompanied by a stern (if polite) warning to stop working in the archive or run the risk of a stiffer penalty and potential deportation. “Please,” our colleague was told, “enjoy your time in Russia as a tourist! But do not resume your research here until you have a different visa.” Ironically, the FMS officers in Elista did not know exactly what visa our colleague needed to do his work. They simply repeated the bromide that working in the archive on a tourist visa was obviously a violation because tourists are supposed to do touristy things, not conduct research.

This was relatively light treatment. There have been reports of other unsuspecting academics caught up in similar visa checks with far harsher results, including heavier fines, instructions to leave the country, and canceled visas, all of which has been confirmed by the results of a recent voluntary survey on the visa question conducted by ASEES earlier this spring.⁷ Perhaps most upsetting of all, at least three foreign scholar “visa violators” in the last two years that we know of—two historians and a social scientist—found themselves not just facing trouble from the authorities but also smeared on

⁶ See “V Peterburge zaderzhany inostrantsy-psikhoanalitiki,” 31 January 2015 (<http://m.fontanka.ru/2015/01/31/071>); and “Amerikanskim zhurnalistam sud v Peterburge vynes usnoe zamechanie,” 16 October 2014 (www.fontanka.ru/2014/10/16/183). For a more general press story on the question, see also “Western Scholars Alarmed by Russian Deportations, Fines” (www.rferl.org/content/russia-western-scholars-alarmed-deportations/26929921.html).

⁷ For ASEES’s statement on the survey results, which suggest that “the number of known cases [of foreigners apprehended for visa violations] is small (no more than 5–6 in the last year),” but that “the penalties can be high,” see www.asees.org/news-events/asees-news-feed/russian-visas-researchers.

the Internet, in some cases in the local press of the regions they were visiting. The gist of the stories in every instance was that these “so-called” scholars had infiltrated the country to poke into things and cause trouble.⁸

Are these signs that Western academics planning conference or research trips to Russia will encounter new administrative hurdles? Unfortunately, we suspect so. Of course, Russia is a big country, and enforcement clearly varies. As the results of the ASEES survey seem to suggest, the vast majority of foreign academics traveling on tourist or business visas have so far *not* run into the sort of trouble we are describing here. Yet it is hard not to read these stories as proof that Russian authorities—or at a minimum, certain FMS offices in certain places—are aiming to put all of us on notice of a new turn toward stricter enforcement of Russian visa policy.

In light of these recent developments, there is some irony in the fact that a recent agreement, signed in 2012, between the Obama and Putin administrations aimed to make travel and exchange between the United States and the Russian Federation easier, establishing three-year visas as the new default for all travelers to Russia.⁹ Unfortunately, the optimism expressed at that time about greater economic and scientific collaboration seems to have been premature, and not only because of the Ukrainian crisis. The heightened attention to visa checking that we are witnessing today began before the spring of 2014, but the current dismal state of Russia–EU–U.S. relations is surely not making things easier. We sincerely hope that our Russian colleagues seeking to conduct research or attend academic conferences in the United States or the European Union have not run into new problems of their own from American or European governments.

The foreign scholars whose work in Russia has been hardest hit by these new realities are advanced graduate students and scholars in the early stages of their careers. This is often the point in one’s training when one spends long stretches in a country engaging deeply with the culture. By excluding such young historians—as well as their older counterparts—from the archives, Russian authorities may be hoping to send a message to a very different group, namely Western policy makers. Yet in doing so, they are targeting precisely the set of people whose development they should seek to foster: foreign scholars interested in understanding the country’s past, equipped with

⁸ To avoid bringing attention to these scholars given the potential implications for their next visa applications, we say nothing here about who they are or where they were visiting.

⁹ “Clinton, Russia’s Lavrov on U.S. Russia Cooperation Agreement” (<http://iipdigital.usembassy.gov/st/english/texttrans/2012/09/20120908135687.html#axzz3YfQIbUyf>); “Historic Visa Agreement between the United States and the Russian Federation Enters into Force September 9” (www.state.gov/r/pa/prs/ps/2012/09/197476.htm).

the knowledge to engage in informed dialogue, and often open to presenting Russia's view of things to publics in the West who might otherwise see the country's actions in the least charitable terms.

Tensions between Russia and the West are running high, and old habits, it is clear, have turned out to be hard to break—on all sides. But it is precisely in times like this that we need to keep cultural contacts and possibilities for mutual understanding as open as possible.