STRONG
CITIES

ONLINE RUSSIAN-LANGUAGE HATE AND DISCRIMINATION AGAINST CENTRAL ASIAN MIGRANTS

CHALLENGES AND WAYS FORWARD

Contents

Executive Summary

Over 2.5 million of Russia's estimated 11.6 million migrants are thought to come from Central Asia (Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, Turkmenistan and Uzbekistan).[i] Dubbed the 'world's largest migration corridor', Russia and the Central Asian states have become mutually dependent on migration as the former relies on an imported labour force and the latter on the flow of remittances. Despite the mutual gains, however, Central Asian migrants in Russia are frequently subjected to discrimination, stigmatisation, bullying, harassment and hate crime. This is compounded by a generally poor quality of life amongst labour migrants in Russia, and results in the social and economic ostracism of Central Asian migrant communities throughout the country.

While organisations like Human Rights Watch have shed light on the exploitation and abuse of Central Asian labour migrants in Russia,[1] there has been little critical exploration of how this abuse manifests online. In particular, the key narratives perpetuated and the various factors that drive increases in abuse remain under-explored. An understanding of how xenophobia takes shape online is essential to inform broader public safety and community resilience efforts, whether those led by national or local officials or community-based organisations. Examining such online behaviour with a focus on Russian-language content could not be more pertinent: Russia's internet penetration increased by 15% between 2015 and 2020 alone.[ii] This task is made all the more urgent by onset and development of the COVID-19 pandemic, and associated increases in online activity.

To address this gap, the Strong Cities Network (SCN), conducted an online investigation into the scale and scope of Russian-language stigmatisation and abuse of Central Asian labour migrants. Through a mixed-methods approach that combined natural-language processing technology with manual qualitative research, the SCN was able to identify key narratives and terminology used to dehumanise and ostracise Central Asians. This paper presents the SCN's findings and provides a series of recommendations for addressing anti-migrant hateful and polarising content online.

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[1] See, for example, Human Rights Watch's 2009 report on the exploitation of migrant construction workers in Russia, available at: https://www.hrw.org/report/2009/02/10/are-you-happy-cheat-us/exploitation-migrant-construction-workers-russia

Key Findings

- In Russia, Central Asian labour migrants endure both a poor quality of life as well as stigmatisation on- and offline. Migrants from post-Soviet Central Asian countries, especially from Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan and Uzbekistan, are frequently subject to hateful rhetoric that posits them as criminally-inclined, 'alien' and culturally incompatible. Between the 1 March 2019 and 15 March 2021, the SCN identified **117,314 public Russian-language posts** containing intolerant rhetoric and/or stigmatisation of Central Asian migrants on Facebook, Instagram and Twitter alone. This is vast, and given this does not account for private groups and profiles on these platforms nor other mainstream and fringe platforms, the actual scale of anti-migrant content in Russian-language online is much larger. Offline, anti-migrant violence is compounded by ultra-nationalist rallies and youth movements that desire a 'Russia for Russians'.

- **Intolerance of Central Asians online focuses heavily on ethnic identity and is therefore underpinned by ethno-linguistic perspectives of what it means to be Russian.** In turn, visibly non-Slavic communities, like Central Asians, are prone to abuse and 'othering'. This is exacerbated by accounts of racial profiling by Russian police, where dozens of Central Asian migrants are (illegally) detained at a time for often minor infractions.

- **Intolerance on the grounds of religion is less prominent in scale and less severe in scope.** This contrasts the nature of anti-migrant sentiment in other contexts: whereas xenophobia in France, the UK and Germany often entails anti-Muslim or antisemitic 'othering', this is less explicit in Russia. This may be due to a) the 'Blasphemy Law' in Russia, which penalises insults against religious belief and/or b) anti-Muslim sentiment being implied in ethnically intolerant rhetoric, given most Central Asian migrants are of Muslim background.

- **Very few positive online counter-voices were identified.** What little there was existed in the context of the COVID-19 pandemic, when social media posts analysed in this study suggested there was concern about a potential exodus of labour migrants due to the severity of the pandemic in Russia. While this suggests there is some cognisance of the value that migrant workers bring to their host countries, these concerns were often framed around concerns that Russians will then have to take what are stigmatised as menial 'gastarbeiter' jobs. There is ultimately a need for widespread public communications around the benefits of migration beyond just the advantages to Russia's domestic workforce.

Recommendations

- International human rights organisations, including regional branches of multilateral organisations like the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees[2] (UNHCR), should work with community influencers and migrants to produce and distribute content that humanises migrant experiences.

- International organisations and credible global media outlets should do more to call out anti-migrant bias in Russian media — beyond academic study, there has been little international attention specifically on how migrants are depicted in the Russian media.

- The SCN and its partners should incorporate a more explicit focus on tackling hate speech targeting migrants - and its impacts - in relevant programming and research initiatives. Ostracism and stigmatisation of migrants is not unique to Russia, and presents a challenge to community resilience across the network's global membership. This could be an important priority for the SCN International Steering Committee and a critical issue on which the network engages multilateral institutions, among other partners.

- Social media platforms should improve their in-house capacity to moderate Russian-language content. Moderators must be culturally-aware and sensitive to the specific terms and phrases (e.g. slurs) that foster hate and intolerance in Russia, as well as beyond.

- While this study provides an important baseline of insights into Russian-language hate and intolerance targeted at Central Asian migrants, this is by no means a comprehensive survey of the online landscape of anti-migrant content. Further research should be conducted to understand how this content manifests on other mainstream platforms (e.g. YouTube) and regionally popular platforms (e.g. VKontakte and Odnoklassniki).

- National governments and other relevant stakeholders across the region that are designing and implementing preventing and countering violent extremism (P/CVE) policy and programmes should dedicate more attention and resources to countering online hate towards migrant communities as a relevant environmental enabler with the potential to heighten vulnerability to radicalisation.

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[2]UNHCR regional branch in Moscow has a mandate to work with migrant communities as well as refugees.

Introduction

In 2020, Russia ranked fourth globally in the total number of international migrants it hosted, according to the [International Organisation for Migration](#) (IOM).[iii] Of the 11.6 million estimated migrants in Russia, over 2.5 million are thought to come from the post-Soviet Central Asia states (Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, Turkmenistan and Uzbekistan).[iv] Migration from Central Asian countries is fuelled by a range of domestic factors, including a lack of employment opportunity, poor economic prospects and religious repression.[v] For remittance-dependent countries like Tajikistan and Kyrgyzstan[3], labour migration is encouraged by the state as a 'crutch' for their otherwise struggling economies.[vi]

Russia is the primary destination of Central Asian migrants, which is unsurprising given the region's Soviet past, and its geographic proximity to and linguistic similarities with Russia. This has created 'the world's largest migration corridor'[vii] and a mutual dependency on migrant labour between the origin and host countries – just like Tajikistan and Kyrgyzstan rely on exporting workers to sustain income through remittances, Russia relies on the influx of labour migrants to sustain its domestic workforce. Despite this, labour migrants of Central Asian descent face significant hardships in Russia, including economic exploitation and an overall poor quality of life compounded by structural challenges that make important processes, like legal registration, difficult and resource-intensive.[viii] This is exacerbated by their stigmatisation leading many to endure discrimination, social isolation and, in some cases, hate crime. Indeed, 26% of respondents to a survey on xenophobia conducted by the [Levada Center](#) in Russia in August 2020 stated they would not allow 'persons of Central Asian descent' into Russia, while only 7% stated they would welcome them as neighbours.[ix] In addition, more than 70% of respondents were in favour of restricting the income of migrant workers, up by nearly 15% percent since 2017.[x]

Implications of the dire circumstances Central Asian labour migrants face in Russia are vast: beyond the obvious human rights and safety considerations, there are concerns that the socio-political and economic ostracism they face may make them vulnerable to violent extremist recruiters. While a recent RUSI report notes that 'the baseline for violent extremism and terrorism among Central Asians working in Russia is low', of the estimated 2000 – 4000 Central Asians that allegedly travelled to join the Islamic State (ISIS), a large proportion are thought to have been radicalised and/or recruited in Russia.[xi] [Open Democracy](#) claims, for example, that over 80% of foreign fighters from Tajikistan were recruited while working in Russia.[xii]

A number of different factors might explain this. The economic position Central Asians face in Russia can serve as a 'push factor' for radicalisation, where poverty and uncomfortable living conditions are contrasted with extremist recruitment narratives that promise financial reward and other benefits for joining their ranks.[xiii] Likewise, psychosocial factors such as the

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[3]According to the World Bank's [World Development Indicators](#) from 2020, the global average percentage of a country's gross domestic production (GDP) that derived from personal remittances was 5%. In Central Asia, three out of five countries recorded a much higher annual percentage, with Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan and Uzbekistan ranking second, third and 22nd in the world at 31%, 27% and 12% respectively. Kazakhstan served as a regional outlier at 0.22%. No data was available for Turkmenistan.

absence of a strong communal infrastructure and/or the emotional impact and isolation of uprooting entirely to another country in search of work removes social and family relationships that might otherwise be important 'protective factors' against extremist messaging.

Importantly, such factors should be seen in the context of increasingly vocal and public ultra-nationalist discourse and activity in Russia. Since 2005, for example, Russian ultra-nationalists and fascist groups have organised yearly rallies to protest migration specifically from Central Asia.[xiv] At the 2017 rally, a member of a youth movement within Russia's larger ultra-nationalist extremist landscape was allegedly responsible for the murder of a 51-year-old man of Uzbek descent.[xv] Although fatalities resulting from targeted violence against Central Asians have decreased since their peak of 49 in 2008, racist and otherwise hateful and polarizing activity remains rife.

The online space is far from immune to such activity. However, there has been little analysis of the nature and scope of intolerance targeting Central Asians online, especially in Russian-language. With the COVID-19 pandemic sending more people online, a better understanding of how anti-migrant narratives take shape online is crucial. To address this need, the SCN conducted an online mapping to identify the main extremist narratives deployed against Central Asian labour migrants in Russian. Based on a mixed method of automated collection and expert manual qualitative analysis, the SCN has produced key findings and proposed a series of recommendations to aid public safety stakeholders across Russia and Central Asia, including local governments, civil society organisations and the private sector, as they endeavour to address the polarisation and volatility it fosters.

Methodology

This study sought to identify prominent discriminatory narratives targeting Central Asian migrants in Russian-language online. To do so, the SCN adopted a mixed-methods approach that combined qualitative analysis of large datasets with natural language processing.

Data collection:
Data was collected from Facebook, Instagram and Twitter between 1 March 2019 and 15 March 2021. Using a keyword-based approach, researchers first compiled a list of 44 Russian-language keywords that could be used to capture hateful speech related to migrants:

- **Twitter**: data from Twitter was collected via the platform's public API, which can be **queried to collect public posts that contain specific keywords.**
- **Instagram and Facebook**: data from Instagram and Facebook was collected retrospectively using CrowdTangle, a commercial social-listening tool that allows researchers to access data from public pages and groups. CrowdTangle only collects public posts, and does not allow any user-level data to be collected.

Researchers then used Method52, a proprietary natural language processing tool owned by the Center for Analysis of Social Media (CASM) to collect posts from Twitter and from the public pages and profiles that were identified by CrowdTangle.

Data analysis:
To classify collected posts as discriminatory or not, SCN analysts set up a series of keyword annotators, which help remove 'noise', or irrelevant posts, from data collected using the raw keywords list. Compiled data was also run through Method52's 'Surprising Phrase Detector', which compares a given dataset against a reference corpus of data in the same language to identify whether any keywords are used disproportionately more or less in the former. The keywords list used to compile data is then updated accordingly.

Method52 was then used to 'clean up' the data, where researchers with contextual expertise trained natural language processing algorithms to distinguish between relevant (e.g. hateful / intolerant) and irrelevant posts. This algorithm had an accuracy of 84% and identified **117,314 posts as hateful or intolerant of Central Asian labour migrants.** 65,555 of these were unique, the remainder were copied and pasted or re-tweeted posts.

To better understand the specific factors that drive intolerance against Central Asian migrants, SCN analysts then used Method52 to further categorise the data into:

Category	Number of Posts
Content about COVID-19	6,721
Ethnically intolerant	36,743
Content focused primarily on migrants and the labour market	86,200
Content targeting migrants' (perceived) religious identities	3,519

Limitations:

While this report aims to be as comprehensive as possible, there are a number of limitations with a study of this nature. First is the issue of data access. Our datasets are drawn from publicly available data from Facebook and Twitter, indexed by the social listening tools with which we work. However, there exist many private, closed and encrypted channels to which we do not have consistent or computational access. Therefore, this report's findings and recommendations are informed **only** by desk-based research and digital analysis limited to publicly available data. It does not speak to the wider ecosystem of private channels and smaller sites that may also host relevant content.

Second, researchers were not able to access data from other social media platforms that are commonly used in Russian, such as VKontakte and Odnoklassniki, due to complexities of connecting Method52 to the platforms' APIs, which provide access to the data, and the limited timeframe of the research project. This study is therefore likely missing a significant amount of relevant data that could have informed our findings.

Third, given the dynamic nature of language and of online syntax in particular, it is also possible that our keyword lists are incomplete and that our datasets are therefore missing relevant content. Keyword-based approaches can also collect irrelevant data. An additional complexity is that hateful speech can differ significantly depending on the group targeted. Not only are different terms used, but there may be a more diverse set of slurs used against one group than against another. This can lead to data bias where the number of results returned might not accurately reflect the comparative quantity of hateful content directed at different groups in reality. While researchers took measures to minimise the impact of these limitations, some omissions may persist.

Fourth, the social listening tools with which we work remove from their databases posts that have been deleted from online platforms for violating community guidelines, terms of service or local laws. Therefore, our datasets will likely not include some of the most heinous posts that may have been removed by the platforms before or during data collection.

Finally, through manual coding of a subset of posts, SCN algorithms were trained to be at least 84% accurate at identifying discriminatory posts. Natural language processing and machine learning are not an exact science and there will always be a degree of bias and error in the decisions the algorithms make.

Analysis - anti-migrant narratives online

Ethnic intolerance:

Although the quantity of posts pertaining to the labour market is higher than the posts classified as ethnically intolerant, manual analysis of posts collected using the methodology reveals that many of those that fall under the former category also contain ethnic slurs or form part of a broader discussion containing such slurs, therefore relating 'issues' with the labour market back to ethnic background. Ultimately, **ethnic intolerance is the most severe type of abuse labour migrants face in Russia.** This reflects social surveys and other research that suggest migrants that share Russia's predominantly Slavic ethnic backgrounds (e.g., from Belarus or Ukraine) are not subject to discrimination, and may explain why Central Asians, who are ethnically non-Slavic and therefore have darker skin and hair, face the brunt of anti-migrant sentiment in Russia.[xvi]
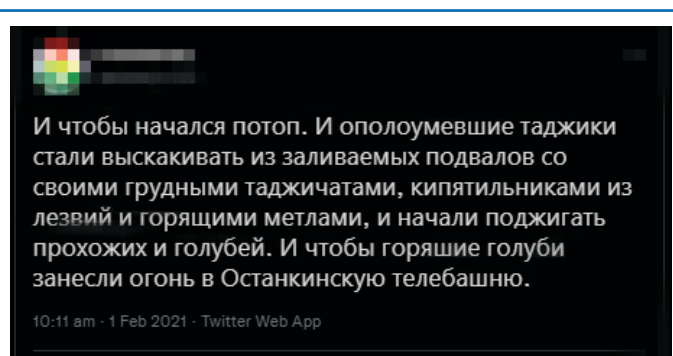
Image 01: "And let the flood begin. And the maddened Tajiks began to jump out of the flooded basements with their chest Tajiks, bladed boilers and burning brooms, and began to set fire to passers-by and pigeons."

Posts classified as ethnic intolerance reveal Central Asians are homogenised using the term 'Tajiks'. Although an innocuous term in and of itself, it has taken on derogatory connotations since the influx of migrants from Tajikistan in Russia in the early 2000s. While Uzbek migrants now outnumber those from Tajikistan, 'Tajik' continues to be the dog-whistle term of choice to conflate and 'other' Central Asian migrants.

The nature and scale of this ethnic intolerance is telling in that it suggests anti-migrant sentiment is not fuelled primarily by migration in general, but specifically by the migration of visibly non-Slavic peoples, of which Central Asians are the largest community. This is corroborated by the fact that a) 'Tajik' was also one of the most popular terms in the SCN's sub-category of content related specifically to the labour market, and b) the

Image 02: "Is it me, or have the "churki" become more aggressive recently?" *"Churki" is a slur for someone of Central Asian origin.*

surprising lack of posts containing religious discrimination, which stands in stark contrast to anti-migrant sentiment in places like the UK, France, Germany and, to some extent, the US, where anti-migrant discourse often entails or is rooted in antisemitism and/or Islamophobia.

There was little explicit anti-Muslim content in the dataset, for example, and posts that were classified as religiously intolerant were mild in comparison to those that fell into the other sub-categories. There are two contextual factors that may explain this: firstly, Article 148 of the Russian Criminal Code forbids public actions that insult religious beliefs, whereas those discriminating on the basis of ethnicity have generally done so with little to no consequences.[xvii] Secondly, anti-Muslim sentiment may be implied in ethnic intolerance, given Islam is the dominant religion in Central Asia.

Мне кажется, белорусы, армяне и азербайджанцы, таджики и узбеки, инициирующие национальные конфликты в Москве, столице России, стали забывать, что Советского Союза больше нет, а дома их ждут чрезвычайно независимые демократические страны.

Translate Tweet

10:52 PM · Aug 9, 2020 · Twitter for iPhone

280 Retweets   7 Quote Tweets   1,193 Likes

Image 03: "It seems to me that Belarusians, Armenians and Azerbaijanis, Tajiks and Uzbeks, who initiate national conflicts in Moscow, the capital of Russia, have begun to forget that the Soviet Union is no more, and extremely independent democratic countries are waiting for them at home."
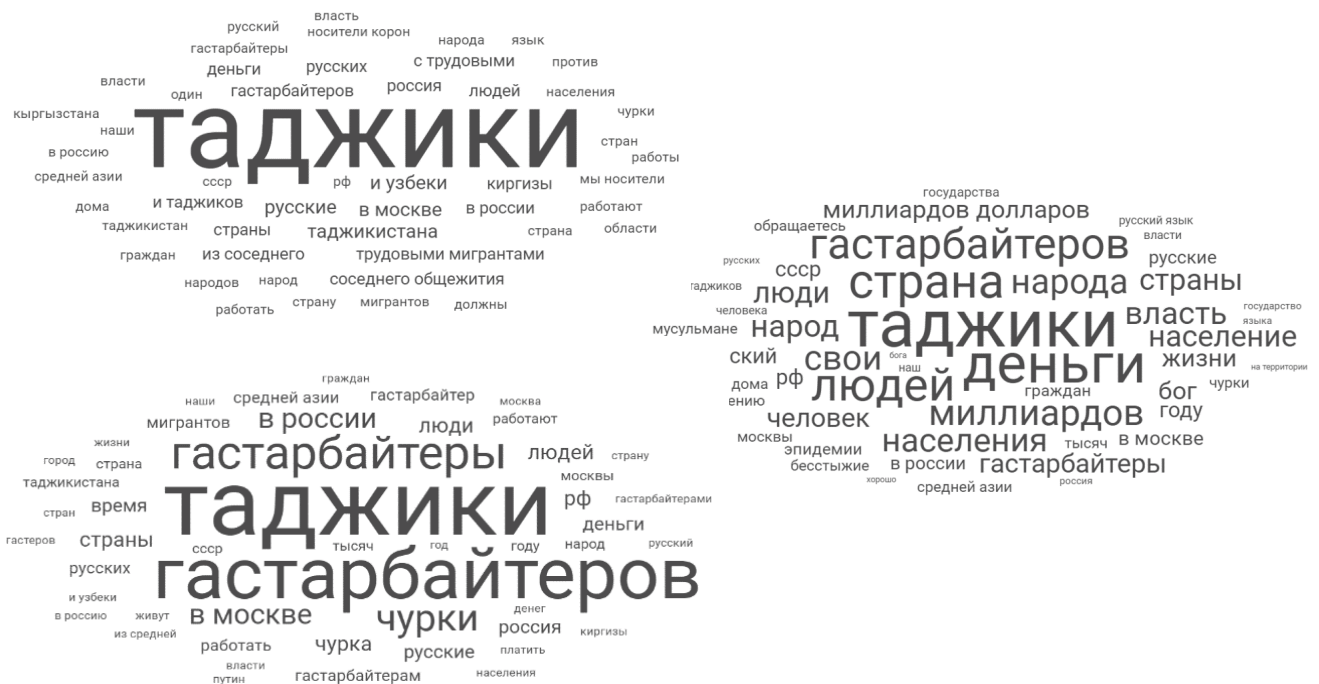

Image 04: Frequency of specific keywords per dataset. The top left represents the dataset of content containing intolerance on the basis of **ethnicity**, the rightmost figure represents the dataset of content containing intolerance on the basis of **religion**, and the bottom left represents the category of data that contained content focused primarily on **migrants and the labour market**. The figures show 'Tajik' (Таджики), used as a slur for Central Asians, is the most frequent term across the data collected by the SCN.

'Gastarbeiters' and the perceived motivations of labour migrants:

In addition to the prevalent use of 'Tajik' as a derogatory term, analysts found notable instances of the word 'gastarbeiter' in our category of content that focused on the labour market as a wedge issue driving intolerance towards Central Asians. The term is German for 'guest worker', but entered Russian language in the late 1990s and has since adopted negative connotations to refer to labour migrants.

Discussions around 'gastarbeiters' generally accuse migrants of stealing jobs from Russian citizens and of being unqualified to work in Russia. The fact that 'gastarbeiter' and 'Tajik' were the most common terms in the data collected suggests the former is used primarily to refer to Central Asians.
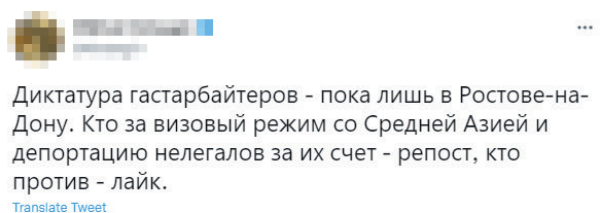
Image 05: "The dictatorship of the gastarbeiters - so far only in Rostov-on-Don. Who is in favour changing the visa regime with Central Asia and the deportation of illegal immigrants at their expense - repost, who is against — like this post."
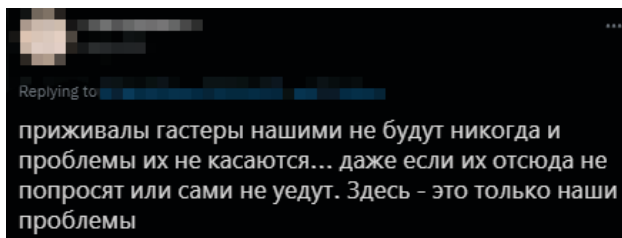

Image 06: "Gastarbeiters, who hang out here, will never be one of us and our problems do not bother them."
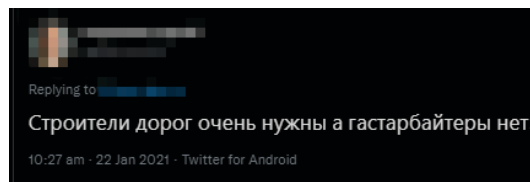

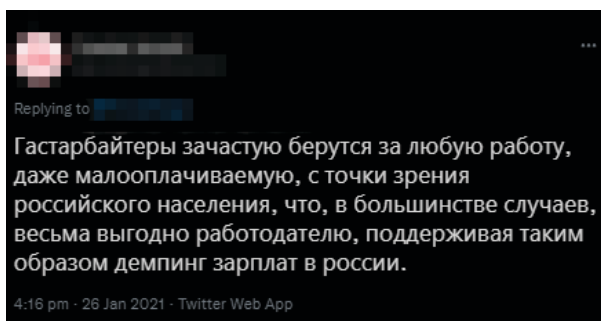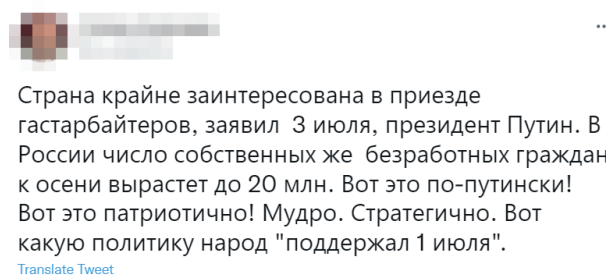**Image 07:** "We need road builders but not gastarbeiters."

Image 08: "Gastarbeiters often take on any job, even low-paid, from the point of view of the Russian population, which, in most cases, is very beneficial to the employer, thus supporting wage dumping in Russia."

Image 09: "The country is extremely interested in the arrival of gastarbeiters, said on July 3, President Putin. In Russia, the number of its own unemployed citizens will grow to 20 million by autumn. That's Putin's way! That's patriotic! Wisely. Strategically. This is the policy the people 'supported on 1 July'."

COVID-19:

Importantly, when discussed in relation to the pandemic, the tone of comments using 'gastarbeiters' and 'Tajiks' was milder than when these terms were used in the context of other discussion topics. When discussing labour market issues, for example, Central Asians were frequently portrayed as a burden on Russian society and the economy (see Image 11). However, when usage of the same terms is seen in discussion around COVID-19, a shift in tone saw posts tend to worry about the impact of a potential exodus of labour migrants in light of the severity of the pandemic (see Images 12 and 13).
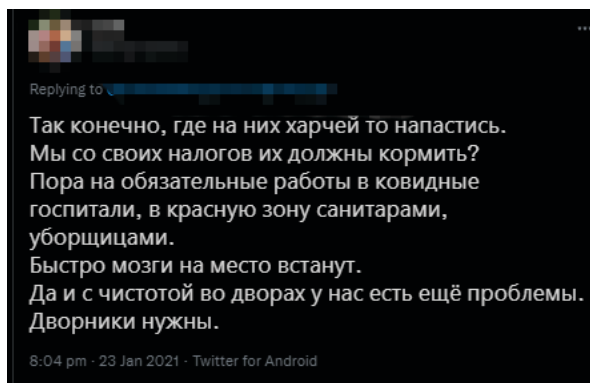

Image 10: Image depicting the most frequent terms in the dataset about COVID-19. 'Gastarbeiter' and 'Tajik' are among the most frequently found keywords in the dataset.

Image 11: "So, of course, where to find food for all of them. Do we have to feed them from our taxes?"

Image 12: "It turns out that all Tajiks will go there and the Russians will have to work at construction sites!"

However, this isn't to say that the pandemic didn't subject Central Asians in Russia to hate speech: [SOVA](), a Russian racism and xenophobia monitor, states COVID-19 'brought a wave of insulting and racist commentary [online] directed at Chinese people and natives of Central Asia'.[xviii] This may not have been captured in our dataset given the mainstream platforms this study focused on, and the pressure on these platforms to respond promptly to racist abuse, particularly related to the pandemic.
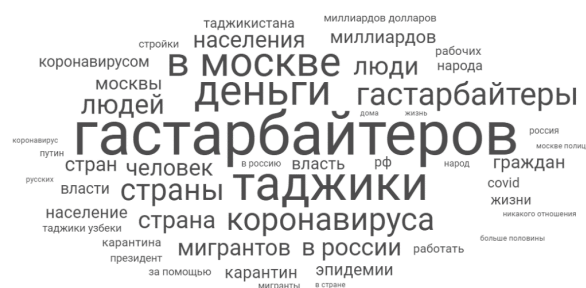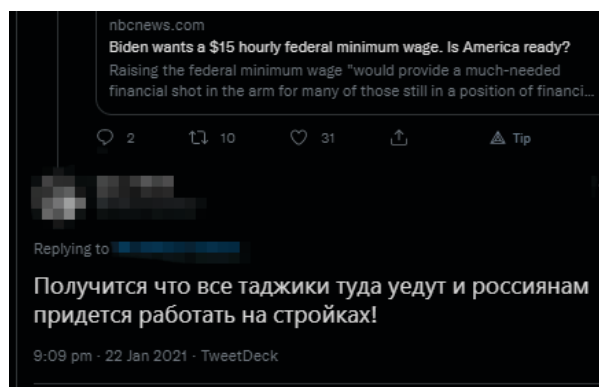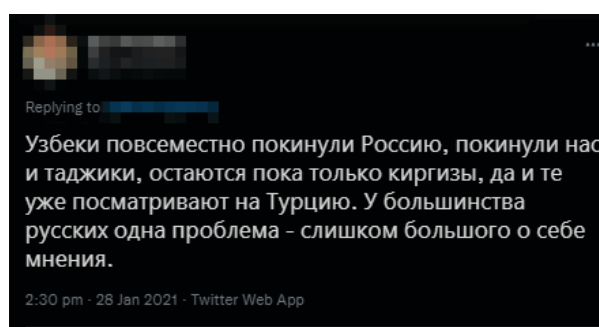

Image 13: "Uzbeks have left Russia altogether, Tajiks have left us, so far only the Kyrgyz remain, and even they are already looking at Turkey. Most Russians have one problem - they think too much of themselves."

Context: institutional 'othering'

The derogatory use of 'gastarbeiter' in the dataset exists against a backdrop of institutional 'othering' of Central Asian migrants. The Russian media, for example, uses 'gastarbeiter' interchangeably with 'migrants', thus affiliating migrant communities with a colloquially negative term.[xix] Russian media also fuels the stigmatisation of Central Asian migrant communities, presenting them as being inherently prone to crime, despite national statistics demonstrating that labour migrants in Russia commit little to no crime: in 2017, for example, data by the General Prosecutors' Office of Russia suggests the overall number of delinquencies by all foreign citizens (not only Central Asian migrants) accounted for about 2% of all crimes that year.[xx] Irresponsible media practices that exploit the concept of 'migrant crime' include, for instance, the specific inclusion of the origins of an alleged criminal when they are a non-Slavic migrant versus more generic framing when they are of Slavic origin. The Russian press has also posited labour migrants as a risk to public health and as unwanted competitors of the Russian labour market.[xxi] In the context of COVID-19, some outlets have even suggested that unemployment amongst labour migrants (an estimated 76% of labour migrants were laid off or forced to take unpaid leave due to the pandemic) will cause them to form gangs and rob Russian natives.[xxii]

Despite Russia's reliance on migrant labour to sustain its workforce, Russian officials have also 'othered' and dehumanised migrant communities. The municipality of St. Petersburg published a handbook for labour migrants where migrants are depicted as objects, for example (see Image 14).[xxiii] This speaks to a dangerously mainstream dehumanisation of labour migrants, where they are literally objectified as mops and paint brushes in government outputs.

Image 14: Image taken from a handbook published by the Municaplity of St. Petersburg. The text is originally in Russian but was translated by regional SCN consultants.

Police crackdowns on labour migrants further expose an institutionalised, deeply-embedded bias towards Central Asian migrants in particular. This is especially pronounced in times of crises such the 2017 terrorist attack in Moscow, which prompted a 'nationwide crackdown on nationals of... Uzbekistan, Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan' in its aftermath when it became known that the attacker was of Central Asian origin.[xxiv] Human Rights Watch also reports Russian police have racially profiled and mass-detained 'migrant workers... of non-Slavic appearance', with as many as 80 Kyrgyz nationals allegedly detained and beaten in police custody in December 2019 alone.[xxv]

Conclusion

It comes as no surprise that the terms 'gastarbeiter', 'Tajik' and 'chock' were the most prevalent in the posts collected for this study. The socio-political mainstreaming of anti-migrant sentiment, reflected in the criminalisation and securitisation of Central Asian labour migrants in particular, has clearly translated online into widespread fear-mongering and stigmatisation of this community. Through the these terms, Central Asian migrants are homogenised and dehumanised online, primarily on the grounds of their ethnicity.

The implications of this are severe: not only are there obvious concerns for social and public health, with xenophobic discrimination and crime not uncommon in Russia, but the hate directed at this community online compounds the offline marginalisation and difficult living conditions migrants endure to create a toxic environment that can be exploited by mal-intended groups and individuals. The financial incentives and narratives of community and purpose espoused by extremist groups like ISIS may appeal to the very real and severe grievances and hardships endured by Central Asian migrants. With 80% of foreign ISIS fighters from Tajikistan understood to have been recruited while in Russia, the factors that made this particular group vulnerable to exploitation clearly merit serious consideration. The COVID-19 pandemic has made an already dire situation worse, with many migrants unemployed and eventually detained for being unable to afford the monthly residence fee they are required to pay.

This study has shed light the drivers of digital has and intolerance Central Asian communities in Russia are subjected to. Analysts found that hate and discrimination against Central Asians is driven by ethno- linguistic 'othering', where Central Asians are ethnically homogenised and labelled with ethnic slurs like 'chocks'. Even though most of the relevant hateful data collected related to labour migrants ('gastarbeiter') taking jobs from Russian citizens, where grievances are ostensibly economic, even in this context the terms used primarily emphasise ethnic identity. Such online behaviour is then set against a context of broader societal and institutional 'othering' of this community in Russia, that also requires addressing at least to some degree if resilience against malign groups, terrorist or otherwise, is to be increased.

The study provides a solid evidence base to understand offline hate towards Central Asian labour migrants is reflected, amplified or fuelled in the online space. Its findings and recommendations are relevant for government, civil society and private sector stakeholders alike, in order to aid more informed approaches to prevention and resilience efforts.

Endnotes

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