



A man, who reached the Russian-Norwegian border intending to cross it, rides a bicycle along a road near a check point outside Nickel (Nikel) settlement in Murmansk region, Russia, October 30, 2015. *REUTERS/Fyodor Porokhin*

A Long Road to Asylum: Syrian Refugees in Russia

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Russia recently intensified its military activity in Syria, but it was not to ameliorate the refugee crisis, despite rhetoric to the contrary. In President Putin's address to the United Nations on September 28, 2015, he talked about "a new great and tragic migration of peoples" and the need to strengthen the governments from where the refugees are coming.¹ Russia is certainly strengthening its support for the Syrian government by bombing anti-Assad groups, but in doing so it supports the regime causing much of the migration in the first place.² In the same speech, Putin also stressed that

the refugees "need our compassion and support." It was a nice sentiment, but a fairly empty one, given that Syrians receive very little of either from the Russian state.

Russian citizens who try to help Syrian refugees on a daily basis know this well. At a meeting with social workers at the Civic Assistance Committee (a UNHCR-sponsored organization that assists refugees) in Moscow on March 21, 2014, I saw their passion and dedication first hand. Several of the social workers I talked to remarked how depressed

they felt because there were so many problems – refugees were being treated worse and worse, while there was less they could do to help them.³ If the social workers encountered obstacles then, just days after Russia annexed Crimea, it's even harder to get resources and responses from government agencies now, as the war in Ukraine continues and a new war in Syria has begun.

The realities such humanitarian organizations in Russia face, however, are a stark contrast to the image projected by the Russian government since it began air strikes on Syria in September. President Putin has claimed that Russia intervened in Syria to help Europe with the refugee crisis, among other reasons. Yet, the situation for Syrian refugees worsens every day, Russian attacks have increased the outflows, and the treatment of Syrian refugees in Russia in particular are all reasons to question the gaps between Putin's statements and the refugees' reality.

Syrians, including refugees and other types of migrants, have been coming to Russia for years. According to the Russian Federal Migration Service, there are currently 7,424 Syrians in Russia.⁴ Of these, only 333 Syrians have received temporary asylum and only three Syrians have gained official refugee status in Russia.⁵ These numbers stand in stark contrast to the four million Syrians who have fled abroad since the beginning of the civil war.

There are many reasons why so few Syrian refugees receive asylum status in Russia. The majority of Syrian refugees are fleeing to Western Europe, for one. But for those that flee to Russia, a host of difficulties awaits them. Some of these

are particular to Syrians, some are indicative of broader asylum policies and practices in Russia. To put Syrians in the context of other refugees in Russia, there are only 816 people who have refugee status in Russia today.⁶ "Refugee status" is one of two statuses provided by the Russian Federal Law "On Refugees," and it provides protection for the applicant, so long as the person wishes to remain in Russia.⁷ Official refugees in Russia are mainly Afghans, followed by Ukrainians, Georgians, and then many others in smaller numbers. The second status, "temporary asylum," has been granted much more widely: 314,497 people currently have this determination in Russia. "Temporary asylum" allows the applicant to legally reside in Russia for one year, but does not provide any material support.

Syrians in Russia

Total **Syrian citizens** = 7,424

Syrians with **temporary asylum** = 333

Syrians with **official refugee status** = 3

Source: Federal Migration Service of the Russian Federation, data current as of June 30, 2015

However, even temporary status poses difficulties to obtain in Russia. There is almost no information provided either at the border or at police stations detailing how to apply for asylum and as a result, many refugees end up with illegal status simply from not knowing how to apply.⁸ Marina Leksina from the Civic Assistance Committee in Moscow notes that most Syrians in Russia are either in the

process of trying to obtain refugee status or have just decided to risk living without it.⁹ “The Federal Migration Service,” Leksina explained, “does all it can to make it difficult to get asylum status. There are not enough workers in the migration services, their pay is low, there is little money for simple services like interpretation, and there is high corruption.” According to the Syrian journalist and political refugee Muiz Abu Aljail, “It costs 40,000 rubles [about \$641] to get temporary asylum [which, legally, is free of charge]. Without it, you will either not get a job or be forced to work illegally, which has led to the emergence of entire slave-labor enterprises.”¹⁰

All of these factors together make it incredibly difficult to gain refugee status in Russia, despite the fact that Russia is a signatory to the Refugee Convention of 1951 as well as the 1967 Protocol.¹¹ According to the Convention, since Syrians are fleeing a civil war they should be accepted as “mandate refugees” instead of having to go through the long, cumbersome asylum process. This is not the first time in recent history that forcibly displaced populations with legitimate reason to turn to Russia have faced such obstacles. Huge waves of Afghan refugees met a similar reception in the mid-1990s. Tens of thousands of Afghan refugees, who had supported the Soviet-backed government in Afghanistan, were refused political asylum in Russia after the regime fell.¹² Those that were not expelled complained of harassment from the authorities and prejudiced attitudes. Today, Afghans are again fleeing their country in massive numbers. Until recently Afghan refugees largely found shelter in Iran and Pakistan, but as attitudes towards them worsened in the past year, they are now striving to reach Europe instead.¹³

But just as Afghans had cause to flee to Russia in the early 1990s, many Syrians have ties to Russia as well. There are approximately 100,000 ethnic Circassians in Syria, who are descendants of the group expelled from Russia in the 19th Century.¹⁴ Circassians have been dispersed throughout the Middle East since the fall of the Ottoman Empire, and currently, the largest diaspora resides in Turkey, with Syria not far behind.¹⁵ Since the 1990s, there has been an organized push for repatriation of Circassians to Russia, but with limited success. The Russian government has not taken any real action to help repatriate Syrian Circassians, and one explanation for this, according to Dr. Sufian Zhemuhkov, a scholar from Kabardino-Balkaria now at George Washington University, is that such a policy would cause further disintegration of Assad’s regime.¹⁶ As a result, far from welcoming Syrian refugees in Russia, the Russian government is more prone to criminalize asylum seekers and sanction them for crossing borders illegally.

In one of the most high-profile cases of Syrian refugees being denied refugee status, a family of six has been trapped in the transit zone of Sheremetovo Airport for two months after being accused of illegally crossing the border, despite the fact that they had Russian visas and the mother’s sister lives in Samara.¹⁷ If they had traveled to Germany or Sweden they might now be receiving shelter and material support; instead, this family was refused entry into Russia and did not have access to a shower for more than a month until a generous stranger recently paid for a hotel room for them in the transit zone.¹⁸ At the time of writing, the family is still awaiting the decision whether or not they will be deported.

Situations like these explain why there have been growing piles of bicycles at the Russian/Norwegian border near Murmansk, the so-called “Arctic route” into Europe through Russia. Hundreds of Syrian refugees have tried to enter Northern Europe by flying to Moscow, and taking the train to Murmansk. From there, they ride bicycles across the Norwegian border.¹⁹ Why by bike? Many who tried to take a taxi across were stopped, and walking across the border is not permitted. Some trying this route have had more success than others, however. In late October, 500 Syrian refugees were stranded at the Russian-Norwegian border.²⁰

The “Arctic route” is just another illustration that refugees often view Russia as a transit country. Marina Leksina noted that “many Syrians are leaving Russia now – they’re exhausted by the degrading attitude of the police and the Federal Migration Service (FMS).” In this way, Russian authorities are essentially pushing refugees to take risky steps to escape to Europe, however they can. In other cases, refugees end up in Russia by accident, having paid a middleman to get them to France, for example, only to be deceived and transported to Russia. What is more, according to the St. Petersburg-based lawyer Olga Zeitlina, many of the Syrians she represented had never even applied for asylum in Russia; their problems with their legal status began when they tried to *leave* Russia.²¹

In addition to adversarial interactions with Russian officials, Syrians are often subjected to negative attitudes from Russians in other settings as well. Russians are growing tired of Ukrainian refugees. Their thoughts about Syrian refugees are much worse because of the cultural, religious, and

language differences. It can be difficult to find volunteers to help Syrian refugees, as many people associate them with ISIS or terrorists, and they don’t understand why Russia should take in *any* refugees, let alone from Syria. Another problem is just a lack of knowledge of the presence of Syrian refugees in Russia whatsoever. According to Leksina, many Russians do not even know there are refugees in the country from anywhere other than Ukraine. If they have heard anything about Syrian refugees, it is often through the media’s wide coverage of the crisis unfolding in *Europe*, but not about those Syrians in Russia.

Nevertheless, despite all of the negative experiences Syrians face in Russia, there are Russians working hard every day to help them as much as possible. Although the social workers at the Civic Assistance Committee were disheartened by the limits of what they could do to help refugees, including those from Syria, they still fight day in and day out to help refugees they work with to gain access to everything from legal assistance, shelter, clothing, food, schools for their children, and more. The Committee also recently won a case against the Russian government in the European Court of Human Rights, which found several violations in the treatment of Syrian citizens, including illegal detention and deportation.²²

Though it would represent progress if the Court finding results in less illegal detention and deportation of Syrian refugees in Russia, it would only be the tip of the iceberg. Even if refugees are not sanctioned, they still have poor prospects in Russia in terms of gaining asylum. Migration officials have been known to advise refugees that

there is no point in trying to get asylum, telling them outside of official meetings: “it’s only given to Ukrainians now – don’t waste your time.”²³ Ironically, until recently, the line was that asylum was “only given to Syrians.” Nevertheless, many Syrians seek not only asylum, but Russian *citizenship*, and are willing to start down the long, difficult path to naturalization through the often opaque migration system. The Civic Assistance Committee helps them with this process.

Russia has a special relationship with and is geographically close to several countries that are driving masses of refugees - Afghanistan, Iraq, Syria, and Uzbekistan. As a result, Russia has just as much responsibility to help refugees as Western

Europe. Russia, Europe, and the United States could all do a lot more to help the people displaced by the multitude of wars and conflicts. But it is hard to expect much for Syrian refugees, Ukrainian refugees, or refugees of any kind in Russia when its own citizens often have to fight for the basic rights and privileges citizenship typically provides. It is clear why the social workers in Moscow felt so depressed – trying to help refugees in Russia means perpetually coming up against a government that often circumvents its own laws and international commitments. Putin called for compassion and support for refugees. Fortunately for those refugees in Russia, where the state fails, there are conscientious Russian citizens who step up.





The opinions expressed in this article are those solely of the author.

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