



Travel Report St. Petersburg, Russian Federation

by the delegation of the Transnational Exchange III project

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Location: St. Petersburg, Russian Federation

Hosting organization: Caritas Moscow

Goal: Understand reintegration for vulnerable returnees in the Russian Federation better

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1. NGOs in Russia

The Russian Federation still struggles with the aftermath of the end of the Soviet Union in December 1991. The sudden transition from communism to a market economy also entailed the loss of a secure job, free medical treatment and steady retirement benefits independent from the previously generated income. Only with the formation of the Russian Federation in 1992 NGOs slowly started to emerge. A few NGOs “helped fill a part of the welfare gap in Russia”¹ mostly funded from abroad, since the population had no savings to donate to charity and a beneficent attitude was less common,

¹ http://www.sras.org/ngo_russia_west_adaption

started offering support to the poor and needy in St. Petersburg. In 1996, however, an inflation of NGOs took place (2065 NGOs). The government had passed the Law 442 which allowed social services to be carried out by NGOs next to state agencies, which the state would reimburse equally (but only if the NGOs were registered and accepted the governmental salaries). The more clients were helped, the more refunds the organization could receive from the government. The service of many NGOs lacks quality and they were also often utilized for duty free imports and money laundering. The inflation of NGOs quickly regressed and only 14 NGOs really provide service nowadays in St. Petersburg. Amongst the Russian population a deep suspicion of NGOs funded from abroad remained in fear of Western indoctrination since the money from abroad was mostly donated from political or religious actors. This suspicion was enhanced by governmental campaigns and laws such as the "foreign agents"² which required NGOs to register as foreign agents if they receive funding from abroad and engage in political activities.

2. Caritas St. Petersburg

Caritas St. Petersburg (Caritas SPb), a Catholic organization, offers support to almost all vulnerable groups including elderly people, single mothers, substance abusers, homeless, victims of domestic violence, mentally disabled people, etc. Caritas St. Petersburg also offers reintegration support for returnees (mostly returning through the ERIN program). Caritas SPb received approximately 90% foreign funding and currently employs 80 staff members. The average income of a social worker amounts to 20,000 RUB (290€). A psychologist earns about 25,000 RUB (363€) and a project manager receives a salary of 30,000 RUB (436€)³. Caritas welcomes a couple of foreign volunteers but lacks committed Russian volunteers. The idea of volunteering is not common in Russia so far. Every municipality tries to offer social assistance, but on a small-scale basis (4 - 6 volunteers). Caritas cooperates with all other partners (Catholic, Orthodox, Jewish, state offices and other NGOs) in St. Petersburg in the pursuit of caring for the needy. Caritas promotes and lobbies for higher standards and more professionalism in social care. It has achieved in St. Petersburg for example that mentally handicapped children receive more education and can attend school until 9th grade.

3. Reintegration assistance for returnees

The success of the return highly depends on the existence of a social network in Russia. In order to be able to apply for any governmental social support, the returnee needs to register or buy residence⁴. Registration can only be completed if the applicant provides the municipal workers with a valid address – the valid address of a private apartment. To acquire private housing poses an insurmountable challenge for returnees since housing is so scarce and very expensive - especially in bigger cities. The typical returning target group, however, cannot afford such high rent prices. Example: one room in communal housing can cost up to 12,000 RUB (120€) per month or a one room apartment around 20,000 RUB (400€) if far away from the metro/public transportation. This is why the returnee will need to stay with family members in the beginning in order to start the registration process. After obtaining the registration, the returnee can get an ID, open a bank account or apply for several social services which will be very limited and basic and take a long time to be accessible.

² <https://themoscowtimes.com/articles/unwanted-and-shunned-russia-cracks-whip-on-foreign-ngos-51332>

<https://themoscowtimes.com/articles/russias-ngos-are-under-increasing-pressure-42283>

³ Exchange rate of January 2018 according to the European Commission currency converter

⁴ <https://themoscowtimes.com/news/russia-puts-renewed-hope-in-repatriation-program-17885>

The granted reintegration assistance (f.e. ERIN) can only be disbursed by Caritas Moscow, which leads the reintegration assistance of Caritas in all of Russia in cooperation with local Caritas staff members. The returnee has to provide Caritas with the registration, an ID, bank account details, a tax number (INN) and invoices of the previously discussed goods/medication to be purchased including a purchase agreement first. In total this process usually takes up six months or more after return. This is why the returnee is also dependent on the social network to provide him or her with finances to survive the first couple of months. Aside from obtaining the right documents the Russian returnee also benefits from waiting for his or her reintegration budget for at least six months because only after six months (183 days after a longer stay than 6 months abroad) the Russian national can change his or her tax status from non-resident to resident. The tax difference is about 17%. According to Federal Tax Service of Russia donations meaning the reintegration budget is categorized as income. Residents pay 13% ⁵income tax, non-residents 30%⁶. Some of the taxes can be retrieved if the reintegration budget was spent on medicine or education. Caritas only transfers the reintegration budget to the bank account of the returnee and never disburses cash for the purpose of minimizing the risk of being accused of promoting political or religious propaganda with the money from abroad. In the light of above mentioned information Caritas states that the reintegration phase, in which Caritas is also available for the returnees, lasts a minimum of one year per case.

The Caritas staff member in charge of the returnees highly appreciates to be contacted by the European return and reintegration counsellors and to be informed about the new return case. This is especially important since Caritas grants itself the right to reject the reintegration assistance of highly difficult and work- and time intensive cases (e.g. a mentally ill young lady returned without the consent of her family with the implication of no social support from her relatives; Caritas now works with this particular returnee almost every day only to keep her alive and supplied with the basics). Caritas has a great network in St. Petersburg which allows the staff members to counsel and to refer the returnees according to their needs. In 2017 Caritas SPb assisted five returned families. In the course of the visit in St. Petersburg the Transnational Exchange III team spoke to two separate returnees.

First returnee: Mr. B

Mr. B fled Russia in January 2015 after he had participated in protests against the Krim annexation and Russia hosting the Olympic Games and was imprisoned afterwards by the police. In Sweden he sought asylum which was rejected one year and 5 months later. Despite the death of his mother he did not want to return and filed a suit against the decision of the Swedish government. Mr. B has Jewish ancestors and experienced persecution and harassment from fellow refugees with a Muslim background in his reception center. In April 2017 he returned to Russia. He received the plane ticket as well as 2000 SEK (200€). In Russia he could stay in the empty apartment of his late mother and he received financial support from his successful brother. Mr. B is faced with a terminal autoimmune disease and is not able to work anymore. Despite his material support Mr. B feels very lonely and isolated. Not having a family rendered him passionately about politics. This is why he dreams of leaving Russia and returning to Europe again.

⁵ <http://www.nalog.ru/eng/individuals/nalog/ndfl/residents/>

⁶ http://www.nalog.ru/eng/individuals/nalog/ndfl/non_residence/

Second returnee: Mrs. M

Mrs. M is an elderly lady who decided to follow one of her daughters, who was married to a Belgian, to Belgium in 2008. She received residence through her daughter and was very active as a Russian teacher in the Russian diaspora. Mrs. M never took a liking to the Belgian life which rendered the decision easy to return when her daughter entered in a new relationship and couldn't host her mother anymore. The return seemed quite spontaneous in 2016 after an 8-year long stay in Belgium. However, Mrs. M had been in close contact with her other daughter, who had remained in St. Petersburg, and other friends. During Mrs. M's stay in Belgium her daughter had organized the purchase of a small but new apartment right next to hers. Only one month after the return the returnee could move into a new apartment which she would amortize slowly. Caritas International Belgium had granted her a reintegration budget of 500€ for a due operation on her spine as well as 2200€ for a special mattress and furniture for the new apartment. She felt right at home after her return since she had never lost touch with her friends and family in Russia. Even now she continues to teach Russian to earn a small salary in addition to her pension. In her case the return seemed quite unproblematic.

4. Children⁷

The most prominent Russian returnees are families. Families are categorized vulnerable if they have more than 3 kids or if the income of the family sinks below 3000 RUB per person. Children can go to school after the arrival in the country of return because education is for free in Russia and registration is not needed. Children who require additional tutoring can receive it for approximately 1000 RUB/h in St. Petersburg. Kids should attend 1st- 9th class. Each school day goes approximately from 9:00 a.m. to 1:00 or 2:00 p.m., whilst parents usually work from 10:00 a.m. to 6:00 or 7:00 p.m.. The school year starts on the 1. September and ends on 31. May with a long summer break.

In order to send a child to Kindergarten, which cares for children from the age 2 to 6, the parents must have a registration. And even then the waiting time of a place in a Kindergarten usually comes up to one year. Kindergarten is also for free.

While the team of Caritas Augsburg visited the competence center for pregnant women as well as for families and women in difficult situations, the social worker informed the team that the center would provide mostly single female parents or women with destructive men with diapers and cribs for their children as well as emotional support and counselling. The social worker indicated that those women in difficult situation often suffered from domestic violence (either against them personally or against the children). The line between parental power and domestic violence is in many Russian households blurred. Despite the suffering many women experience they are hesitant to seek help because a traditional Russian saying goes "Do not take the quarrel outside your shack" – meaning to not talk about domestic problems in public. This hesitancy is not entirely unjustified for another reason also: the consequence of speaking to third (state) parties can be very drastic. The Russian government removes the child instantly as soon as any domestic violence allegations or supposition have come to its attention. In this case the child is being dropped at a hospital for emergency care. Afterwards it is referred to a state care center – all this while the investigation against the parent(s) is carried out. This means that in some cases the mother is separated from its child without justification for an

⁷ Visit to Caritas Community Center – child care

extended period of time. The parent needs to fulfill the appointed stipulations. Only afterwards the child is returned.

5. Elderly people

The retirement age for elderly men is usually 60 years and for women 55 years⁸. Depending on the works, industries, professions, positions, occupations and institutions people can also retire earlier. The Pension Fund of the Russian Federation provides a list with all exceptions and a pension calculator⁹. The pension of war veterans is 25000 RUB, the invalid pension only amounts to 7000 RUB per month. The pension varies from region to region taking into account the varying living expenses. In Moscow, pensioners for example receive a higher pension since the living costs are so expensive. As soon as elderly people receive their pension, they automatically can use the public transportation for free.

Elderly people can choose between three different types of retirement homes: those run by the State (12 homes in St. Petersburg), those run for commercial purposes and those run by religious organizations with altruistic motives (mostly Christian or Jewish; 12 homes in St. Petersburg). The state nursing homes usually accommodate more than a 100 people. In order to get a place in one of these State homes the applicant should calculate a waiting period of one year. A registration with the State is a precondition to receive pension, which in turn is the precondition to apply for a place in a retirement home. On average 75% of the monthly pension is taken to cover the basic needs for elderly people in the homes. Additional or special services must be paid with the remaining 25% or by the family.

Caritas SPb also runs a small elderly home with 20 people applying a special companionship concept. The elderly people not only share rooms with one to three people but share every meal with all residents. With this concept isolation and loneliness shall be prevented. Caritas SPb also discovered that many families could not afford to send their elderly family members to retirement homes and would care for them at home. Most adults, however, lacked experience with home care. This is why Caritas published explanatory material as well as offered training to affected families.

According to the Caritas worker many elderly people stay on their own. Projects like the charitable canteen should help elderly people to keep touch with others and to give them a structure for the day.

6. Mentally or physically disabled people

In general, people with a disability receive an invalid retirement of 7000 RUB with additional local payments. The pension can be much higher if relatives or social workers apply to a respective office and bring a clinical report, reports about necessary support, etc.. The application process is lengthy and unnerving. However, in the end it is worth it. The problem in St. Petersburg is that many families are either not aware or are not capable of passing the long and difficult application process. In this case, it is highly recommended to seek help from local counsellors. The invalid pension is very important for the support of the invalid since it is hard finding a company which is willing and

⁸ http://www.pfrf.ru/en/pens_system/type_pens/

⁹ http://www.pfrf.ru/en/pens_system/pens_calc/

equipped to work with disabled¹⁰. When mentally disabled orphans grow up, they are usually put psychiatric care homes with difficult conditions and almost no stimulation¹¹.

Caritas SPb offers a day center for young people who are mentally handicapped. In this center the young people learn basic skills (reading letters, simple calculations) but the center also focus on handcraft and art to strengthen the self-confidence of the attendants. This center seems to be very unique, but there are several NGOs in Russia who might offer activities with a similar approach. Children with handicaps and their families face discrimination and stigmatization. The workers from the center described that it takes a very long time and is challenging to involve the parents in working with the child and being interested in the achievements of the youngster in school.

Families can apply for tools and aids for the care of their physically disabled child. The decubitus matrass and raising aids will be paid by the government. However, the time between application and reception of the aids amounts to six months usually.

7. Drug and alcohol addicts

Alcoholism seems to affect a greater part of the Russian society. Many don't see an alcohol addiction as an illness or as a problem though. If someone publicly confesses that he or she is struggling with this addiction, he or she will be highly stigmatized. Drug addiction in contrast is more accepted as an illness which is why families are more open to send the respective family member to a detoxifying treatment in the state hospital (4 weeks). This treatment is for free and quickly accessible if pressing—even at commercial centers (here payment is needed)¹². Afterwards the drug addict can pass rehabilitation in rehab centers (state or NGO). The state and the NGO rehab centers work free of charge, but the problem is that there are no legal standards of treatment. In the past couple years a few cases of human rights violations in rehab centers have been reported in the media (unnatural death, forced medication).

The drug addiction has a greater consequence but just the physical harm. If drug addicts are tested positive during a police check, the employer is automatically informed about the employee's drug consumption which may lead to termination of employment. The same happens when a drug addict undergoes the treatment at a state hospital or rehab center.

8. Conclusion

The returnees need to prepare themselves to live without the reintegration budget for the first six months after arrival in the country of return. It is also important to inform the returnee about the tax status and the expected taxes in order to avoid confusion if the reintegration budget disbursed to the returnee is lower than the planned amount due to the tax.

The social network plays an essential role: returnees who stayed in touch with family members and relatives has to be able to stay with the family for a temporary period of time. The family has to be able to provide for the returnee in the interim time until the reintegration budget can be disbursed.

¹⁰ <https://themoscowtimes.com/articles/finding-work-is-difficult-for-disabled-12639>

¹¹ <https://themoscowtimes.com/articles/russian-psychiatric-care-homes-in-need-of-drastic-reforms-say-experts-49929>

¹² <https://themoscowtimes.com/articles/no-rehab-for-russias-drug-addicts-36746>

Also the family could help in providing an address for the registration: The highest priority for returnees should be acquiring the state registration which in turn gives access to social support.

Especially if the returnee is mentally or physically disabled it is necessary to inquire about the support family members can provide and about the accessibility of medical facilities as well as the confirmation that the reintegration partner has the capacity to support such a vulnerable returnee. Caritas Moscow grants itself the right to reject the reintegration assistance of highly difficult and work- and time intensive cases (including ERIN cases).

9. Travel schedule

Day 1	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Visit to Caritas St. Petersburg headquarters - Meeting with first returnee - Visit to Caritas St. Petersburg social welfare center A) Ward for elderly lone people B) Office for training family members who care for disabled C) Competence center for pregnant women and families in difficult situations D) Addiction counselling - Visit to second returnee
Day 2	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Visit to soup kitchen for homeless people - Visit to charitable canteen for people in need - Visit to day care center for needy children
Day 3	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Visit to support center for young people with disabilities - Final discussion in Caritas headquarters

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This report does not claim to be exhaustive but it represents impressions of the delegation and insights from conversations carried out in St. Petersburg.



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