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Immigrants By Any Other Name... Flow From Former Soviet Union Reveals Refugee Farce

By Don Barnett

In the recent debate about who is a political refugee and who is an economic migrant, very little is said about the slide of United States refugee policy into politics and PAC economics.

Immigration from the former Soviet Union illustrates the uses and limits of U.S. refugee policy. A refugee, according to the Refugee Act of 1980 is an individual who has been persecuted or who has "well-founded fear of persecution on account of race, religion, nationality, membership in a particular social group, or political opinion." By definition, the act empowers the U.S. to respond quickly and with flexibility when a need arises to provide refuge to those in imminent danger at home who have nowhere else to go.

The United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) now places 16 to 17 million people in that category worldwide. In 1992, the U.S. funded the admission of about 122,000 refugees (roughly 16 percent of all legal immigration). Of these, 61,000 were admitted as refugees from the polity known as the Commonwealth of Independent States (CIS), the largest number from a single region and more than twice the statutory immigration limit per country.

There are some important advantages refugees enjoy over regular immigrants, like a cash allotment and an interest-free loan for transportation to the United States. (Since the inception of the loan program in 1980, the State Department has collected less than 31 cents for every dollar loaned for transportation to the U.S.) The federal portion of the bill for refugee resettlement was 709.3 million dollars in FY92.¹ Focusing on the federal portion of resettlement costs, however, ignores expenditures on social services after the initial settlement period of 8 months. Most of the true cost of refugee absorption is borne outside the refugee-specific budget items, at the state and local as well as the federal level. According to the National Association of Governors, state and local expenditures on refugee support are "conservatively" estimated at \$620 million for the first year of refugee support alone.

A 1991 U.S. Department of Health and Human Services study indicates about 44 percent of refugees from the CIS (former Soviet Union) are receiving cash

public assistance a year after arrival, well after federal refugee assistance has run out. The actual welfare dependency rate is higher since the study excluded all individuals over 64 and those who received only non-cash assistance. (14.5 percent of arriving refugees from the CIS are over 65 and move directly into the Social Security and Medicare systems.) Quoting from the budget proposed for 1993 by the Bush administration: "Refugees would continue to be eligible for regular welfare on the same basis as citizens." In fact, refugees are actively encouraged to use Medicaid and other programs such as food stamps and public housing.

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According to the UNHCR, almost no one emigrating from the CIS today is a refugee. Nevertheless, the Lautenberg Amendment of 1989 was recently extended for two more years, defining entire groups in the CIS as subject to persecution and thus entitled to refugee status under U.S. law:

Once an individual asserts that he is a member of the covered class and asserts that he has been persecuted or has a fear of persecution that individual shall be deemed a refugee, subject only to whatever countervailing the INS may have or produce to establish that the individual was not persecuted or could not reasonably have a well founded fear of persecution.

With a perfunctory assertion of persecution the applicant learns that dissemination is as important for getting by in America as it was at home in the old USSR. Eighty percent of the refugee quota goes to Jewish applicants, most of the balance is awarded to Evangelicals — among whom has been reported a wave of dubious conversions and a tendentious vision about a miraculous gateway to the west.

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Because of the great numbers with automatic eligibility (7,000 to 8,000 applications a month), Russian refugees of today, besides belonging to "Lautenberg" categories, must have relatives in America — themselves recent beneficiaries of the resettlement program. In this, refugee admission parallels the chain migration of family members that typifies most immigration to the United States. Since citizenship is not required of the "anchor" relative, it is, more precisely, an accelerated version of immigration minus the requirement that the visa-holder be an individual unlikely to become a public charge. We don't know how many refugees could be admitted to the U.S. as regular immigrants — either under recently expanded (but still small) skilled worker categories or because of family ties with U.S. citizens. About a third of the more than 300,000 we have accepted since 1975 have been here long enough to be citizens and thus could serve as "anchor" relatives for normal immigration. It is clear that the regular immigration quota is underutilized vis à vis the refugee quota. This year less than 3,000 will be admitted as immigrants from the CIS.

Refugee status is the destination of choice for those immigrating to America and for those in America who would otherwise have to help with the costs. Processing immigrants as refugees sets the stage for special group infighting for privileged admission status, and transfers the costs of resettlement from the sponsor and the immigrant to the taxpayer. More importantly, it weakens the necessary link to an established community and the need for integration into the culture, language and economy. While the U.S. has defined broad legal categories for refugee admission, it has, paradoxically, surrendered all control over the selection of individuals who enter the U.S.; that decision is the prerogative of the would-be immigrant and can be made with little sacrifice or regard for economic conditions in the host country.

It's no surprise that the Russian press now trumpets the U.S. as a "poor man's paradise" for the quick-witted. Entrepreneurs, propagating an updated version of the streets-are-paved-with-gold myth, hawk advice in Moscow about working the ropes of social services in New York. Their prime victim may be individuals like one of my Russian friends: he is near retirement, he has no skills, he does not speak English, and he is planning to emigrate because he is convinced "a person can live beautifully on welfare in America."

Most refugees from the CIS also have the option

to go to Israel, a migration which the Israeli philosopher Avishai Margalit says "is closely linked with the possibility of immigration to the United States." Recently, immigration from the CIS to Israel has dropped to the point where it equals the numbers going to America and there is some debate about whether the U.S. should accept even more emigrants who might otherwise go to Israel.

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Alton Frye, Washington director of the Council on Foreign Relations, writes that the option to admit more Jewish emigrants to America gives the States Department leverage over Israel in the Mideast peace process. The pro-Arab lobby, and a growing constituency of recent arrivals from the former Soviet Union and their supporters, would like the U.S. to take all those who would otherwise be emigrants to Israel. Israel may be the only serious counterforce to practically irresistible political pressure for greatly expanded subsidized immigration to the U.S. from the CIS.

Our refugee policy has outlived its historical mission and now plays a part in any number of agenda quite unrelated to providing sanctuary to those fleeing persecution. Any discussion about the future of U.S. refugee policy must be premised on the privatization of most immigration from the former Soviet Union. Such a discussion should be part of a larger national debate about the impact of public assistance on all forms of immigration. As a starter, bringing the costs home to the beneficiaries is a modest suggestion for rationalizing the decision about who gets in and who pays.

Perhaps only in a place like the old Soviet Union would it come as no surprise that a policy which began with a humanitarian concern has ended so thoroughly in politics. ■

NOTE

- ¹ 410.6 million - Office of Refugee Resettlement, Health and Human Services;
192.3 million - State Department;
93.2 million - "other" at Health and Human Services;
13.2 million - "administration" at INS/Justice Department.