

# PROGRAMME UPDATE



International Federation of Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies  
Fédération Internationale des Sociétés de la Croix-Rouge et du Croissant-Rouge  
Federación Internacional de Sociedades de la Cruz Roja y de la Media Luna Roja  
الاتحاد الدولي لجمعيات الصليب الأحمر والهلال الأحمر

## RUSSIAN FEDERATION: PARTICIPATORY ACTION RESEARCH WITH MIGRANTS

19 May 2006

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### In Brief

Appeal No. 05AA073; Programme Update no.4

Appeal target: Revised from CHF 4,156,903 (USD 682,437 or EUR 550,590) to CHF 4,299,391 (USD 3,302,250 or EUR 2,751,965); Appeal coverage: 19.8 % (*Please click here to go directly to the contributions list on the web*)

**Related Emergency or Annual Appeals:**

Russian Federation 2005 Annual Appeal. For details, please go to the website at [http://www.ifrc.org/cgi/pdf\\_appeals.pl?annual05/05AA073.pdf](http://www.ifrc.org/cgi/pdf_appeals.pl?annual05/05AA073.pdf)

**For further information please contact:**

- Russian Red Cross: Tatyana Nikolaenko, President, Phone 7 095 126 5731; Fax 7 095 230 2868; email [mail@redcross.ru](mailto:mail@redcross.ru)
- Russia Delegation: Alexander Matheou, Head of Delegation, Phone 7 095 937 5267; Fax 7 095 937 5263; email [Moscow@ifrc.org](mailto:Moscow@ifrc.org)
- In Geneva, Miro Modrusan, Regional Officer, Phone: +41 22 730 43 24, Fax + 41 22 733 0395; email [miro.modrusan@ifrc.org](mailto:miro.modrusan@ifrc.org)

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### Background

#### Migration in Russia and the local context

When the Soviet Union collapsed, an estimated 25 million Russians were living outside of the newly founded Russian Federation. Once at home as Soviet citizens, they suddenly found themselves abroad in newly independent states. An estimated four million of them have returned to Russia over the last fifteen years, fleeing conflict or exclusion, to build new lives for themselves and their children. An estimated 1.5 million of them still do not have citizenship.

Between 500 – 1500 Migrant Russians returned from former Soviet Republics to Pilninsky region over the last 15 years. They were attracted by the relative stability of its farm enterprises, past associations, or links to family and

friends in the region. The psychological stress of moving was heightened for many by the transition from urban to rural life and unexpected experiences of stigma for being foreign even though ethnically Russian.

The farm enterprises offered work and accommodation but with salaries as low as 300 rubles per month (\$10 USD). Migrants survive through cultivating private land plots, self medicating and managing their own household repairs. Despite the hardships, migrants have shown initiative and courage in building new lives.

Much of the vulnerability experienced by migrants is structural and therefore common to the wider rural community. Yet there are heightened vulnerabilities for migrants stemming from the on-going struggle to achieve citizenship. Migrants without citizenship are excluded from opportunities to seek alternative employment, to travel, to access pensions and to pursue higher education.

The process of achieving citizenship is in itself costly, timely, and even humiliating if one has to deal with hostile bureaucracy. The stress of this process and the exclusion that comes from lack of citizenship is primarily what makes migrants more vulnerable.

The underlying picture that comes from this Participatory Action Research (PAR) is that structural vulnerability is in the fact the most limiting factor in the lives of migrants in Pilninsky rayon but is the relative vulnerability of lack of citizenship that is most painful to endure.

#### The Russian Red Cross and migrants

Migrants are one of the key target groups of the Russian Red Cross (RRC), as it was declared in the RRC Statutes, the RRC Strategy 2010, and other policies. Support to migrants comes in a variety of forms including legal support, psychological support, humanitarian aid and anti-stigma work. The participatory research project was initiated to ensure that Russian Red Cross services to migrants are responsive to needs, supportive of rights, complementary to state services, and guided by migrants themselves.

#### **Purpose of Research**

- To reveal the most acute vulnerabilities and essential needs of migrants in Pilninsky rayon of Nizhny Novgorod oblast, reflecting the experiences, concerns, and ideas of migrants in order that these views may be taken into account by policy makers and service providers.
- To promote dialogue between the Russian Red Cross, Third Sector actors, and the State regarding respective roles, responsibilities and commitments to migrants.
- To assist the Russian Red Cross and other Third Sector actors in identifying niches for practical action and advocacy in support of migrants and in partnership with migrants.

#### **Methodology**

The PAR in Pilninsky rayon was the product of collaboration between the Russian Red Cross, the International Federation of Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies (IFRC), the British Red Cross, the Swedish Red Cross, local communities, authorities, social welfare and mass media.

The following organizations were represented in the Research Team:

- Nizhny Novgorod RRC regional branch (3 person)
- RRC Headquarters (2 persons - instructors)
- IFRC Russia Delegation (3 persons)
- "Countryside tribune" regional newspaper (1 person)
- Local Social Welfare service (2 persons)
- Local Police Passport office (1 person)
- Local Police Station (1 person)
- Local Employment Center (1 person)

The Research Team also included one local administration official and 2 local migrants who volunteered as part of the team.

PAR in Pilninsky rayon of Nizhny Novgorod oblast was carried out in the period from November 21 to 29.

The Research began with a 3-day workshop where the Research team was trained in PAR methodologies. Then, for the space of a week, 4 focus-groups were carried out each day; their findings were then summarized during plenary discussions. Over 200 migrants took part in the focus groups during the week. Focus group participants were selected according to the following criteria: all participants must be persons who have not yet obtained Russian citizenship.

The following main topics were suggested for discussion within the focus groups:

1. **Reasons for migration into the Russian Federation.** What motivated migration into the Russian Federation? Was their migration voluntary or forced? What are their life stories?
2. **Problems typically experienced by migrants.** Are there any restraints as regards access to Health services, education, pension or employment? What difficulties are experienced when struggling to receive Russian Federation citizenship?
3. **Livelihoods Analysis.** What are sources of a household's (family's) livelihoods (money, food, support) and their proportions? What is their money spent on and to what extent?
4. **Social environment and migrants' mobility.** How do migrants interact with the local community? Do they experience psychological isolation? What difficulties do they face while contacting other people?
5. **Stakeholder analysis.** What structures are involved in supporting migrants (legalization, employment, housing, social welfare, etc.) and what are their inputs? What could be changed? Who impedes and who contributes to the adaptation and integration of migrants in Russia?
6. **Vulnerabilities and their classification.** Which category of migrants is the most vulnerable? What are migrants' feelings and understandings of their vulnerability? What are the ways to cope with vulnerabilities?
7. **Coping strategies.** To what extent is there socio-psychological adaptation of migrants? What is their individual perception? How do Russian migrants adapt themselves?

The report reflects the personal experiences, concerns, and ideas of migrants as shared by them during the focus group discussions. Some topics were amalgamated due to their close interconnectedness. Recommendations summarizing the Research findings are based on migrants' opinions and suggestions.

## Main Findings

### *1) Departure:*

During the 1990s, from all across the former Soviet Union, Russians returned to their ethnic homeland. Many had been born outside of Russia's new borders at a time when identity was primarily Soviet not ethnic. Most had hardly sensed the alienation that had been unexpectedly thrust upon them in the newly independent states. For some, the warning signs of this alienation were enough to motivate migration. For others, war or persecution made migration an urgent necessity.

Conflict in Tajikistan and the south Caucasus induced an exodus of Russians from those regions. In other CIS countries, the pressure came from a progressive sense of social exclusion, particularly linguistic exclusion that persuaded Russians that their own future, and the future of their children, would be more safely secured on Russian soil. "The turning point for me," recalled one participant who had lived in Kazakhstan, "was when I walked out of my home and saw a hand written sign that said – Don't leave, Russians, for we are in need of slaves and prostitutes." Another explained: "We really didn't want to leave. But when it came time for our daughter to enter university she was excluded because she could only read and write Russian. So for her, we had to move."

Russians that lived in Central Asia and the Caucasus tended to be highly trained professionals whose skills were in short supply in less developed parts of the Soviet Union. Many enjoyed relatively good housing and salaries. Almost all of them were urban. The decision to move was often extremely painful. But in the early nineties the future for Russians in the newly independent states looked grim. National languages assumed prominence on the streets, in the media, and in schools. History was rewritten and the Russians, once the bearers of progressive civilisation, were recast as invading neighbors. All across the former Soviet Union inflation wiped out savings. Job opportunities were few and far between. From a distance, Russia at least appeared to maintain a capacity to offer opportunities for education, stability, and work. And after all, migrants believed, at least there would be no discrimination.

**2) Arrival:**

“I left Kazakhstan because of the language policy. My children needed to get a higher education and there was no hope for that without a knowledge of Kazakh. So I took my family home to Russia to Pilninsky Rayon, where long ago I had lived and worked. What was waiting for me? Hostility, bureaucracy, blocks, delays. I said – Comrade, I’ve come home to where I lived and worked. No, they said, you’re a foreigner.” This experience is typical of the trauma many Russians experienced once they returned to their ethnic homeland. “I was forced out of my home in Chechnya because I was Russian. So I returned here, where I had once lived. But no, here I am treated like a foreigner too.” For the most part migrating Russians chose to settle in areas where they had once lived or where family and friends were now living. Few had concrete plans about how and where to build their new lives. They arrived at the train station and began the long process of legalising their presence and securing somewhere to live and work. Some were lucky: “My neighbours were kind to me from the start. I was always treated as one of their own.” Others less so: “When I arrived I was treated like a parasite – as if I wanted to steal from people and live off other people’s labour.” Despite the fact that most of the arriving Russians in Pilninsky Rayon were emigrating from urban areas, they chose to settle in the countryside for economic reasons. The cost of living in rural areas is lower and many collective farms were willing to provide housing to this new source of labour. Work was available because of a general exodus of young people from the countryside. So throughout the nineties the new arrivals settled in and began adjusting to a new country and a new way of life – with few of the comforts taken for granted in the past.

**3) Stigma:**

One of the most unexpected and distressing discoveries of the new arrivals was the extent to which they would have to endure stigma, even though this was just what they had hoped to leave behind. “I am a Russian, but fellow Russians will not treat me that way,” said one participant, “even here I am an alien.” Participants referred to humiliating incidents in shops, government administrations and with neighbours, and to a painful and enduring sense of alienation. Some participants analysed this stigma as being rooted in anger: “Just look at the population of these villages – at the sort of people who have stayed. They are lazy and drunk. The creative ones left. And then we come – hard working and willing to slave away for tiny salaries. This often infuriates local residents.” Experiences of stigma were a dominant theme throughout the focus groups, yet one participant claimed: “Despite everything that’s been said to me, I still feel at home here.”

**4) Citizenship:**

The dominant theme throughout all focus groups was the vital question of citizenship and its painful consequences for Russian migrants. “I travelled to Moscow to sort out my passport. They laughed at me. Literally, they threw me out. ‘Go and get your passport where it was issued,’ they shouted. But how can I go to Ukraine? They wouldn’t even let me in. Recently my father died in Belarus and I couldn’t even go to the funeral. Without a passport I’m trapped and can’t move around.” Such incidents were common to all focus groups. Many Russians arrived in Pilninsky rayon without knowledge of the required registration documents that would allow them to transfer their Soviet passport to a Russian passport and receive the registration stamps required for work permits, medical care, and education. For many migrants, this has proved to be the most limiting factor in their lives.

In the focus groups, participants referred to the humiliation of attempting to access the correct documentation. While some participants described passport control services as helpful, many had found interaction to be degrading and unhelpful. It is also costly. Until registration documents are complete, migrants are expected to travel to Nizhny Novgorod every three months to submit documents and take an HIV test. This is a huge strain on an often tiny budget for migrant households. Even more of a financial and moral strain is the process of retrieving documents from the embassies of newly independent states in those cases when the required documents were lost at the point of origin. Passport Offices will finance travel to the embassies in some cases but participants referred to painful experiences of rudeness at the embassies themselves as migrants seek to retrieve lost documents or comply with registration requirements. Requests are often refused or delayed. So frustration accumulates as hopes are raised and dashed for a resolution to the registration process. In Pilninsky Rayon, officials acknowledged that the registration process had been hindered by a single official who had mislaid essential documents of a number of residents. This explained some of the frustration in the focus groups. But the wider picture was of migrants having arrived in Russian with inadequate documentation and still, years later, being in the process of becoming full citizens. In each of the focus groups, the problem of citizenship was listed as the number one problem. “I don’t need anything” claimed one participant, “not help, not aid, just give me citizenship and let me get on with my life.”

Lack of citizenship places significant limitations on migrants. Without it you cannot buy tickets to travel, be employed anywhere other than on the farm, or access higher education. Participants referred to being afraid of even travelling to the nearest town, Nizhny Novgorod, for fear of being stopped by the police for a document check, and being fined or arrested as a result.

For migrants with the correct documentation in hand—and most newly arriving migrants are better informed about necessary documents—registration can take place relatively quickly. However, for those whose documentation is lost or now in a foreign country, the citizenship process seems endless. “The whole process is just extortionate,” claimed one participant, “the cost of travel, legal advice, submitting forms – it’s just beyond our financial reach.”

#### **5) Work:**

“I lived in Uzbekistan but after perestroika the atmosphere just kept getting more anti-Russian. So I moved to live with my brother in Pilninsky Rayon. I didn’t have all the right documents to get citizenship so I could only find the lowest paid labour – 20 dollars per month. I’m near pension age but how I’ll ever collect my documents so that I can receive a pension I can’t imagine.” Migrants settled into rural areas because of contacts, access to housing, and employment. Yet while employment is available, the pay is extremely low by any standards. On this issue, as in others that are discussed below, the vulnerability of migrants and native rural residents becomes interlinked.

The situation of migrants without citizenship is disadvantageous in that there are no other employment options other than the farm, and that due to lack of registration, migrants tend to be offered only the lowest paid jobs. One couple referred to a salary of 60 roubles per month as a storeroom guard (\$2 USD) with the wife earning 300 roubles per month (\$10 USD) as a kindergarten teacher. The average salary in the focus groups was around 500 roubles (\$15 USD) per month. “When we started working here my husband earned 300 roubles. Now he earns 600 roubles. We’ve been discussing – maybe he should try and get a job as a cleaner in the nearby town. There he might even get 1000 roubles.”

Participants claimed that their lack of citizenship made them easily exploitable despite the fact that many migrants are highly qualified specialists. Participants also claimed that as they were new to the region, they lacked knowledge of formal and informal mechanisms through which to struggle for better conditions.

#### **6) Housing:**

“They allocated me a house. There were no windows, a broken roof and a broken floor,” recalled one participant. Migrants chose to settle in Pilninsky Rayon because of past links to the region and because of family and friends, but also because the relative success of its farm enterprises meant that one could hope for housing and employment. Yet the housing that was allocated was in some cases in a dire state. Others were more fortunate. “The Migration Services gave us money and we built a small house. We’ve been treated well and can’t complain.” In terms of housing, migrants are often relatively worse off because they inherited properties in disrepair and have struggled with small salaries to purchase essential supplies. Local residents, through their long-term presence in the area, have been better able to ensure that properties were maintained. Yet even for local residents, years of do it yourself repairs have reached limits and the need for building materials was considered common for all residents. Some migrant participants, who once saw the offer of allocated housing as an incentive, now feel that the offer has trapped them. The farm enterprises have not allowed them to privatise their houses and so if they cease to work on the enterprise, they lose their homes, binding them therefore, to one way of life.

#### **7) Older People and Children:**

The vulnerability of older people is exacerbated by limited access to pensions. Participants referred to two primary concerns. Firstly, migrants near pension age who have still not completed their citizenship procedures are fearful that they will not receive any pension at all. Secondly, in many cases employment documents prior to migration had been lost or destroyed and as a consequence only a minimum pension was being received (around \$30 USD per month) as no record of previous income tax payment was available. Many local residents also receive minimal or near minimal pensions and are therefore in similar circumstances. Despite the meagre size of these pensions, participants did in fact refer to older people as being relatively well off in rural areas, as even a minimum pension is larger than the average salary.

For children also, two underlying themes recurred in focus groups. Firstly, the cost of schooling, in terms of clothing and equipment, dominates household expenditure. Families do receive 100 roubles per month (\$3 USD)

for child support and this is immediately given to the school for school lunches. Whatever cash migrants receive from work is spent on clothes and shoes for children. For the most part, participants did not refer to or ask for any type of humanitarian assistance, but in this case there were requests that some way be found of providing school kits.

The second theme is the fear of intergenerational poverty. It was this that caused several participants to regret that they did not find some way of settling into a city where there may have been better prospects for children. Children who are completing school have little chance of pursuing higher education. Even if migrant children have the required documentation it is unlikely they will be able to access the tuition fees. "What hope is there for my daughter to go on to higher education? The prices are fantastical. Yet it's tragic because she does so well at school and is always top of her class. And yet what sort of life awaits her here if she stays? We are stuck."

For parents and children, higher education is the best potential escape from the limiting poverty of rural life. But this door is closed for many migrants and local residents. Another option for young men is conscription. Conscription is notoriously feared by urban families but in the countryside it is a form of escape and a chance to learn a trade. However, participants complained that, without full citizenship, their children were not allowed to sign up for service.

The hopelessness encountered in focus groups among parents and children regarding prospects for the future was symptomatic of the wider community.

#### **8) Coping:**

"I rely on myself. I really don't want other people's help. One time I did ask for help and I found it humiliating. So I won't do it again. I'll make my own way."

"I don't want humanitarian aid from charities. I can make my own way. I just want citizenship."

These comments are representative of most participants in the focus groups. Migrants came across as being resourceful and independent. They did not want hand outs, but obstacles cleared so that they could lead independent lives. Yet the obstacles that currently exist in the form of lack of citizenship and small salaries are significant, and several focus groups concentrated discussions on how people cope in these circumstances.

Participants agreed that both migrants and local residents spend only a minimum on food and rely instead on private land plots to feed themselves and their families. Without these plots it would be impossible to survive. Adults avoid spending money on medicine too, and self medicate with herbal remedies. Only when children fall ill medicines are purchased. Food, transport, medicines, clothes, and utilities account for the monthly budget.

Migrants do have access to health care, although some participants claimed that they too pay because they don't have the right documents for free access. Others thanked the kindness of medical staff, who are willing to treat everyone regardless of citizenship status.

Windows break, roofs leak and yet there is no money to purchase materials. Participants admitted, when necessary, the only way to cope is to steal essential supplies.

The Kolkhoz Community Centre, as it is still known, is one of the few places where one can meet for information exchanges. But generally, mutual aid and support occurs naturally between neighbours. Migrants are often the most energetic members of the community, taking pride in their houses and seeking solutions for common problems. One participant told of a village that had never enjoyed access to gas. A migrant settled into the village, and soon worked to ensure that the village was connected to the local gas pipeline. The whole village therefore benefited from his arrival.

When discussing coping mechanisms, there were relatively few references to the specifics of migrant vulnerability. Instead, a broader picture emerged of rural communities surviving on small monotonous diets, travelling little or not at all, self medicating, making do with self repairs or tolerating disrepair, and rarely purchasing anything new.

**9) The Unique Vulnerability of Migrants:**

Migrants arriving in Pilninsky Rayon were fortunate in that the farm enterprises in the region offered relatively good conditions compared to other rural regions in the Oblast. Yet even here, migrants found themselves caught up in a structural vulnerability common to rural areas across Russia. The main characteristics of this vulnerability include low wages, limited employment options, poor housing, very basic utilities, and weak public transport. The functioning farm enterprises and existence of land plots mean that residents, both migrant and local, can survive. However, extreme limitations on the availability of cash mean that relocation, higher education, retraining, capital repairs, and access to fee-charging medical care are all closed options. This appears to trap the local population, both local and migrant, in its current state, with little hope for common solutions, until an improved economic environment brings with it new opportunities for an improved quality of life.

Within this environment, there are vulnerabilities unique, or at least heightened, for migrants. These include, in some cases, lack of full citizenship, which impacts on vulnerability in a number of ways, such as the need to spend cash on registration fees; limited mobility; limited access to health care and pensions; limited employment options; some disadvantageous housing arrangements in cases when migrants were allotted houses in disrepair; and stigma, which impacts on migrants' senses of self esteem. On top of this, there has been the psychological trauma of relocation and adapting to such a different quality of life.

The vast majority of ethnic Russian migrants arrived in the nineties. It was at this time that the Russian Red Cross set up its first migrant services. The combined approach of legal support to promote the achievement of citizenship, psychological support to help migrants through the stress of relocation, and awareness-raising to counter public stigma, was clearly a relevant and intelligently designed intervention. Everything heard in the focus groups verifies that the angle selected by Russian Red Cross was appropriate.

Yet as the flow of Russian migrants reduces to a trickle, and the remaining cases of citizenship claims are addressed by the authorities, and the initial stress of adapting and stigma recedes with time, then the relative uniqueness of ethnic Russian migrants alongside the local population becomes less evident. If all the obstacles related to citizenship are removed from the migrants participating in the research, then the vast majority of them will still face the greater limitations of the structural vulnerability common to all residents.

This meant that the atmosphere in the focus groups was quite different from that experienced during Russian Red Cross participatory action research with older people in urban areas. Even though salaries received by the migrants in this research were even lower than the minimum pensions received by older people in urban areas, the participants expressed less desperation about their situation. This appears to be for two main reasons. Firstly, relative poverty is less striking in the countryside than in the cities, and therefore vulnerability is a widely shared rather than isolating characteristic. Secondly, the countryside provides for more coping mechanisms such as land plots allowing for greater independence from cash.

**10) Recommendations:**

The PAR mobilised the research team to consider ways to promote the social inclusion of migrants. The team tried to think holistically – to consider the macro environment down to the individual migrant. Fundamentally it was agreed that there needs to be simple and effective legislation to facilitate citizenship and this legislation needs to be communicated to migrants respectfully and clearly. Rural areas in Russia are enduring a demographic crisis even more acutely than cities. The young are deserting and only the old are choosing to stay. Migrants need to be attracted and motivated to settle permanently. Yet the more distant the decision making the less easy it was to talk of practical action. The legislation is needed, but the team could only propose to remind local authorities and local media of this. On a local level, it was felt more could be done to promote social inclusion through mass media, and events such as information days for migrants that have both a practical and celebratory function. It was felt more could be done to provide detailed support to individual migrants struggling with the citizenship process, especially the retrieval of lost documents. Ultimately, much depends on migrants themselves—their efforts in mutual aid, self promotion, and their own capacity to demand access to entitlements. The main recommendations are summarised below.

**What Can Government do?**

- Promote effective laws and processes to facilitate the citizenship process
- Provide clear and respectful support to Migrants during the citizenship process
- Promote inclusive approaches to migrant residents – particularly with regard to work licences.

**What Can Third sector Organisations do?**

- Provide legal advice
- Launch information campaigns on anti-stigma
- Advocate to authorities on behalf of migrants
- Provide charitable assistance to most vulnerable migrants
- Provide comprehensive services to migrants struggling with the citizenship process – including helping to fill out documents and retrieve essential documentation from Moscow.

**What Can Migrants do?**

- Remain informed of entitlements and rights
- Form mutual aid groups for the sharing of information and advocacy
- Be in contact with local media regarding the situation of migrants
- Be as active and as independent as possible

**Recommendations for Red Cross (action post research)**

As follow up to research, the Red Cross should fund an information campaign for migrants in Pilninsky Rayon. It could fund booklets and information stands that could be permanent features in the town. It is essential that this is done out of respect for the participants, the local administration and RRC branch.

It is also needed to set up a Federation/RRC roundtable in early March to determine the new migration strategy. In addition, it is needed to refocus on trafficking and illegal migration – these are the new most vulnerable migrants and a background document and project criteria is essential.

The approach should be international – linking Central Asia, the Caucasus, Russia, Belarus, Ukraine and Moldova – so that assistance can be provided at point of departure and arrival.

*The research team would like to thank local authorities, police, social welfare service, employment centre of Pilninsky rayon and “Countryside tribune” regional newspaper for their cooperative assistance.*

**The Research Team is:**

*Tamara Grinevitch – Chairlady of Nizhegorodsky RRC regional branch*

*Tatiana Grinevitch – Nizhegorodsky RRC regional branch*

*Liubov Molodtsova – Administration of Pilninsky rayon*

*Marina Beliakova – Police Passport office of Pilninsky rayon*

*Nina Chumakova – Head, Employment Centre of Pilninsky rayon*

*Anatoly Kuzmitchov – Police Station of Pilninsky rayon*

*Larisa Diakova – Expert, Social Welfare service of Pilninsky rayon*

*Marina Dobrodeeva - Expert, Social Welfare service of Pilninsky rayon, migrant*

*Igor Bondarenko – migrant*

*Natalia Bushueva – Legal Adviser, Nizhegorodsky RRC regional branch*

*Gulsum Abdulkhaeva – Reporter, “Countryside tribune” regional newspaper*

*Alexander Matheou - International Federation of Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies*

*Dmitry Fedotov – Training and Analytical Department of the Russian Red Cross*

*Elena Mikhel – International Federation of Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies*

*Natalia Sharif – International Federation of Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies*

*Lina Aleksandrova – Training and Analytical Department of the Russian Red Cross*

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