

African Migrants in Post-Soviet Moscow: Adaptation and Integration in a Time of Radical Socio-Political Transformations

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Abstract

The changes since the breakup of the USSR have impacted African migrants' social composition, as well as their strategies and forms of adaptation and integration in the capital city of Moscow. In this study, we discuss the factors influencing the choices of African migrants, related to their background as Africans and to their perceptions of the receiving society. We distinguish between two social groups of African migrants and argue that while one group seeks integration into the Russian society, the other limits itself to mere adaptation to life in Moscow.

Keywords: African migrants, community, diaspora, megacity, Moscow, socio-cultural adaptation, socio-cultural integration

Introduction

Africans have always constituted a rather small minority among the migrants to the Soviet Union and, after its break-up in 1991, to the Russian Federation. It appears that their numbers, as well as their impact on society at large, will likely never compare to those of migrants from former Soviet republics, or even from some other countries, such as China. At the same time, it is evident that nowadays the influx of Africans into Russia is growing, and that Africans are becoming more noticeable in the Russian ethno-cultural landscape. It is safe to predict a further increase in the number of African migrants in Russia, provided that Russia remains an open-to-the-world state. However, their infusion into Russian society faces

difficulties explainable by the unpreparedness of many of the migrants on the one hand, and by the incomplete readiness of the Russian state and society to accept them, on the other.

The lives of migrants in the world's largest post-socialist society may differ significantly from that which applies elsewhere. So, it is clear that any "global" study of migrations would be incomplete and imperfect without taking migrations to Russia into serious account. Yet, there are still only a handful of studies on Africans in post-Soviet Russia (Davidson and Ivanova 2003:190–204; Kharitonova 2003; Ivanova 2004; Allina-Pisano and Allina-Pisano 2007; Bondarenko et al. 2009; Boltovskaja 2010; 214).

Socio-Cultural Adaptation and Integration: Challenges and Opportunities

This paper is based on field evidence collected by the author and his associates from 2007 to 2016. The research includes two interrelated parts: the pathways of socio-cultural adaptation and integration Africans choose, willingly or forcibly on the one hand, and their perception and appraisal by the receiving society (as reflected in the prevailing opinion about Africans and especially in their most typical image among native Russian citizens), on the other. The point here is that while most frequently African migrants estimate themselves as "partially adapted" to their new reality, it is definitely not by chance that there are many more Africans who regard themselves as "well-adapted" to life in Moscow among those who consider the native Russians' attitudes towards them as positive or tolerant. This exists in parallel to groups of migrants who believe that Russians treat them poorly, and as a result describe themselves as "ill-adapted". Thus, the attitude of the receiving society is a significant factor in migrants' lives (Googueva 2007:47–48).

The methods used in the research included both structured and non-structured interviews, distributing questionnaires with subsequent database compilation, extensive observation (participant, when possible), and intensive informal communication. We

regarded observation and communication as the most appropriate methods for this type of study and hence most important. In total, information has been obtained from over 150 Africans from 19 African countries and about 300 native Russians based on non-probability sampling. The analysis is grounded on the theoretical frameworks of urban studies and on different conceptions of community, particularly of “symbolic” and “imagined” communities. It is informed by the historical and sociological context of post-Soviet changes in African migrants’ social composition, the typical forms of self-organization and strategies they employ to further their integration in the Russian capital megacity Moscow – a “global city-region” (Sassen 1991; Scott 2001; Soja 2003), and the modes of acceptance of their presence displayed by the local socio-cultural environment.

From communist capital to neoliberal megacity: Post-Soviet transformations and Moscow Africans

It would be difficult to understand how African migrants can try to live in the Moscow of the 2000s without acknowledging that certain historical particulars of Russian society pose specific challenges to them. For one thing, Russia does not have as long-lasting, diversified, or contradictory history of interaction with Africans, as most Western European nations do (Golden-Hanga 1966; Blakely 1986, 2007; Fikes and Lemon 2002; Matusevich 2008b, 2009; Novikova 2013). Many such nations’ historical involvements have resulted in the firm establishment of diaspora communities and the elaboration of at least some basic principles of the receiving societies’ attitudes to, and their states’ policies toward, the newcomers. In addition, the “closed” nature of the Russian society in still recent Soviet times, and the difficulties of the reforms of the transitional period complicate the matter even more.

The national mass media have also played a negative role. Until the late 1980s, the image of Africans that the media spread was generally always positive (as a people struggling against world imperialism and economic backwardness), but during Gorbachev’s *Perestroika*

and in its aftermath, Africans were often represented as symbols of hopeless savagery and stupidity. It was also implied, and even openly stated, that by helping African countries, the communist regime had just been wasting money, instead of making friends with the “civilized world” (i.e., the West) and raising the living standards of Soviet citizens (Abiodun 2005; Quist-Adade 2005; Usacheva 2008, 2012). “Russia does not know Africa, or pretends it does not know, because the image of Africa in Russia is as follows: a poor continent where people live primitively in the forest, eat coconuts and bananas and where all have AIDS,” says a Beninois who spent thirteen years in Russia, from the late 1980s until the early 2000s. Today, this attitude towards Africa and its inhabitants remains alive in the consciousness of a portion of the Russian population. The position manifests itself, for example, in angry comments on the Internet on every official(s’) declaration that Russia will help African countries (most often in the context of writing off part of their debts).¹

As in any contemporary society (Ojo-Ade 2001; Winant 2004), there are both active and passive (implicit) racists in Russia.² There were quite a number of racist acts against Africans in Russia, especially between the late 1990s and early 2000s. It is an erroneous view, though widespread in Russia, that there were no racists in the Soviet Union and that they suddenly materialized in the turbulent post-Soviet society of the 1990s. Racial prejudice does not spawn from nothingness, and even in the 1960s (Mazov 2000; Hessler 2006; Boltovskaja 2014: 86–90) and furthermore in the time when popular belief in communist ideology was decaying during the 1970s and 80s, there were people (probably less numerous than nowadays) who disliked racial “others”, Africans in particular, despite propaganda suggesting otherwise. However, what is important to realize, is that these people had no possibilities to act or even express their views openly. The Soviet authorities could still suppress all that did not conform to the official ideology, whether good or bad. In any case, in the post-Soviet era, due to both the national and international media, many people in the

world, including those in Africa, became very well-aware of extreme acts of racism that took place in different Russian cities not so long ago. In particular, awareness of these racist acts prevented some Africans from going to Russia for educational purposes, and in general, it seriously damaged the image of Russia in Africa and worldwide (Bondarenko 2010). As a result, a young educated man whom we interviewed in Tanzania in 2007 told us, “[the Russians] ‘are really racists, like Nazis.’”

Naturally, social and political cataclysms always provoke aggravation of the interest to the “other,” and the Russian society, one of the most turbulent at the turn of the millennia, has revealed this interest in a variety of forms, including some that are really painful (Evgenyeva 2004). Yet our research leads us to agree with Elena Kharitonova’s (2003:192) statement that, “in general, Moscow’s Africans are assessed [by Moscow Russians] without steady negative associations and do not have the status of ‘enemy’” in the mass consciousness of Muscovites. Besides, it should be noted that in the 2010s, violent manifestations of racism have become less frequent than in the 1990s–2000s, which of course, does not mean that the problem of racism is eradicated (European Commission against Racism and Intolerance 2013, 2016).

Another, evidently most popular view of Africa and Africans portrays them as exotic objects of curiosity. (It is not by chance that Africa has become a popular destination for wealthy Russian tourists). For those that share this view, Africa is associated with heat, bananas, hippopotamuses, and so forth. There is no aggression in this perception, but it does reflect the fact that people are not ready to accept Africans’ presence in Russian city streets as an everyday reality. This oversimplified and one-sided image of Africa and Africans is actively exploited by film producers, TV soap opera and sitcom directors, and advertisers (Gurevich 2008; Bondarenko et al. 2009:96–98). For instance, Africans are often portrayed on the billboards of tanning salons; on the Internet, one can easily find offers promoting “real

African show programs for corporate parties, New Year celebrations, and weddings.” The most recent trend is to invite a black Father Frost, a Russian equivalent of Santa Claus, to entertain children for the New Year (with which, this character has been associated since Soviet times, and not with Christmas).

One must also consider that Russians, especially the young, have very little basic knowledge about African culture, ethnography, history, geography, politics, and so on (Bondarenko et al. 2009:98, 2011:128–29). This can be viewed as a symptom of the general unsatisfactory situation with school education in present-day Russia. Indeed, “the deficit of information leads to simplification and corruption of the image” of Africa and Africans in Russia (Kharitonova 2003:190). The majority of our Moscow African interlocutors attribute some young Russians’ anti-African actions to the sheer scarcity of real information about Africa and her peoples (Shakhbazyan 2007:242). However, it is worth noting that in recent times, African art and photo exhibitions have become quite frequent events in Moscow’s cultural life, and many young people can be seen in the exhibition halls on these occasions. It also goes without saying that the youth form the overwhelming majority in concert halls when an African group is giving a concert. This may include professional groups, coming from abroad like Beninese *Gangbe Brass Band* in May 2007, *The National Ballet of Rwanda Urukerezeza* in June 2015, and several others, or semi-professional, formed by Africans living in Russia, like *Sun Music* or *Djembe Africa*. Schools of African drumming and African dance schools, run mostly by native Russians who may attract Africans to teaching, are becoming more and more popular among young Russians in Moscow and other cities.

Despite this apparent appreciation of African culture, in a 2008 survey only 36 percent of almost one hundred interviewed Moscow university students were able to name at least five sub-Saharan countries, while 26 percent could not recall even one. It became clear in the course of conversations that some of them were confused by the very expression

“Africa south of the Sahara.” Being asked to name prominent Africans they knew, quite a few students named Diasporan people of African descent such as African American jazz musicians, Pele, Naomi Campbell, and some other prominent black people of African descent, and 57 percent could not name anybody at all. Naomi Campbell, who became known to post-Soviet people as a symbol of glamour, and who during the survey was a focus of media attention because of her marriage to a Russian oligarch, was mentioned by 37 percent of the respondents. Conversely, the most often recalled Africans in the continent, included Nelson Mandela and Patrice Lumumba, in only 14 and 11 percent, respectively. It is clear why these were the most often mentioned Africans: Mandela, because of his victorious struggle against apartheid, is probably the best-known African world-wide, and Lumumba was remembered by Russian students because of the “Lumumba University” – one of the best known Russian educational establishments.³ 47 percent believed that African languages (not European) are official in a majority of postcolonial African states, among other incorrect beliefs.

In our 2016 survey conducted across several Moscow schools among thirteen and seventeen-year-old students, many of the 122 interviewees, when asked what African countries they knew, named countries of the Middle East and Latin America. 66 percent could not name even one notable African, while some students recalled prominent blacks but not Africans: Bob Marley, Usain Bolt, American rappers and hip-hop artists.

The current national immigration legislation is more liberal than in Soviet times when the country was actually closed to potential migrants of any sort, except for a handful of politically motivated individuals, like leaders of communist parties (John Marks of South Africa).⁴ Yet, it is still very difficult for a foreigner to gain a permanent resident or citizen status; the easiest way to do so is the same as it was in the USSR – to marry a citizen of the country. Our interlocutors from national human rights organizations have told us that very

few of those seeking refugee status, including Africans, are granted it. All in all, the Russian migration laws remain generally rather opaque, and hence, still leave enough room for arbitrary interpretations and corruption in their practical application. This is particularly due to the continuing discussion, both in the public sphere and various governmental circles, of whether migrants are beneficial to Russia, and about what desirable ethnic/cultural and educational/professional priorities should be introduced as selection criteria for accepting them. Opinions vary, from the idea of only welcoming ethnic Russians, especially from the former Soviet republics (currently the only category of migrants for whom it is relatively easy to get Russian passports) to that of opening the doors to the country as widely as possible. Because of the huge influx of migrants from former Soviet republics and the migration crisis in Europe, the dominant public mood today is that immigration legislation should be tightened. It is certainly the case that “there is no strategic vision of migration as a positive event in Russia up to now” (Aleshkovskiy and Iontsev 2008:86).

At the same time, the situation regarding migrants from Africa has changed radically with the breakup of the Soviet Union. By the end of the Soviet era, almost all Africans residing in the country were university and college students, that is, non-permanent residents. They were spread rather evenly among numerous education centers all over the USSR, except for parts of Siberia and the Far East. In 1990, over 180,000 foreign students and graduate students studied at almost 700 educational institutions in 120 cities of the country, and Africans were 24 percent of them, i.e. about 43,000 people (UNESCO 1990:3.301–3.403; Golubev et al. 1994:90; Sheregi et al. 2002:9–28). Today, the overwhelming majority of Africans in Russia are concentrated in a limited number of large cities, Moscow first and foremost. The number of African students coming to Russia has decreased considerably, mainly due to the cutting of state quotas for free education and the introduction of tuition fees that are too high for many prospective students. However, the raising of the Iron Curtain and

the collapse of the USSR made it easier for foreigners to get entry visas, leading to the influx of other migrant groups into the country.

Though in the 2000s, the visa regime became tougher than in the preceding decade, at present, some Africans residing in Moscow are refugee status seekers from the sites of current or recent violent conflicts like the DRC, Côte d'Ivoire or Somalia. However, the majority are economic migrants from all over the African continent. Today the number of Africans in Moscow can be estimated very roughly at about 10,000, including only a bit more than 1,000 students. Moscow houses nearly one quarter of the approximately 40,000 African residents of the Russian Federation. No official figures are available, but these are the reasonable figures several African activists and knowledgeable Russian Federal Migration Service officials provide.

As noted earlier, African migrants most frequently estimate themselves as “partially adapted” to their new Russian reality. Research has shown that many Africans experience difficulties in adapting to life in Moscow. For many, if not most present-day newcomers, matters are complicated by such issues as insufficient education background and poor Russian language skills, poor knowledge of Russian lifestyle, differences in climate, few, if any, Russian friends, and very limited financial possibilities with little hope for any kind of support by the home country’s official representatives (Bondarenko et al. 2009:89–91).

Coming to Russia with one’s family alleviates the migrants’ psychological problems to a certain extent. However, it makes the problem of earning money even more critical. While in recent times foreign students have been able to work legally, not all Africans have legal residence or work permits, and it may be very difficult to acquire them, even for graduates from Russian universities, sometimes including those married to Russian citizens. According to unpublished statistics of the national migration service, in 2011, only 356 migrants from sub-Saharan African countries (including 113 Nigerians and 91 South

Africans) were granted work permits all over the Russian Federation. Moreover, African migrants usually complain that it is rather difficult to find a good job, even for those fluent in Russian and those with permanent legal status (in 2011, seventy-six sub-Saharan African migrants were granted permanent residence permits and thirty obtained full citizenship).

Moscow, now a typical neoliberal metropolis, offers plenty of low-paying jobs that tend to be taken by migrants as well as poor and unskilled workers from different parts of the Russian Federation and Muscovites from underprivileged social backgrounds. For example, one can see Africans distributing advertisement leaflets or magazines, standing as “sandwich people” at subway station entrances, or hanging advertisements on bus stops and building walls. Typically, this work is done by Russians from financially disadvantaged social backgrounds – mainly students and pensioners, but Africans have managed to penetrate this sphere of labour activities. One can also see Africans selling cheap goods on the streets, working at construction sites, cleaning offices, or sweeping streets and yards. The situation can be more accommodating for students, who as a rule have residence permits, are provided with housing at university dorms, study Russian with teachers during the first year of their stay in the country, and can seek support from their countries’ embassies. However, their adaptation to life in Moscow does not run smoothly either (Zherlitsyna 2009; Boltovskaja 2014: 113–132). Many of the immigrant students must also look for jobs, usually in the same sectors as African non-students.

After coming to Moscow, most economic migrants do manage to improve their living standards in comparison to what they were accustomed to in their home countries. Nevertheless, only a few of those not trained at a university or college in Russia can succeed professionally in white collar occupations and earn enough to send remittances home to support their relatives. This is one of the reasons why many Africans that arrive in Russia would probably say that they hope to one day go to Western Europe, United States, Canada,

or Australia. One respondent, a Cameroonian residing in Russia for over ten years, said about such migrants, “I call them ‘swindlers’; about 90 percent [of Africans that come to Russia] are of this sort – those who arrive here and then begin to look for a way to go further”. Other Africans would say that they hope to return to their home countries sooner or later. Yet, some of these people are eager to recognize honestly that in most cases their ideas of going to the West or returning home is nothing more than a psychological trick they are playing on themselves; the dream of enjoying a sweeter life in a Western country or being able to return home in the future helps these migrants cope with the hardships they face in Russia.

It can be safely argued that today it is more difficult for people coming from Africa to adapt to life in Moscow (and Russia in general) than it was during Soviet times. The validity of this generalization becomes especially evident when one compares the situation of the students before and after the end of Communist rule. The Soviet authorities were interested in the ideological and political indoctrination of foreign students, including Africans, therefore, they were invested in their acclimation (Katsakioris 2009; Mazov 2009; Kret 2013). In the Soviet Union, the systematic facilitation of foreign students’ adaptation to life was thought out at the state level, with the participation of scholars (psychologists, social scientists, and others) as well as special departments in universities tasked with their care. Their Soviet fellow students, partly with the encouragement of university authorities and partly because it was a rare opportunity for them to communicate with foreigners, usually treated Africans – whom they saw as victims of imperialism and as fighters for a better life – with sincere interest and affection, eagerly including them in their company.

Today, foreign students most often encounter a very formal attitude on the part of the university authorities, which are no longer bound by such strict state regulations and control; no special measures for their socialization are taken, and on campuses Russian and African students form two distinct communities, each keeping to itself (Gdaniec 2009; Gribanova and

Zherlitsyna 2012; Boltovskaja 2014: 122–130).⁵

In those segments of the mass media sympathetic to their plight, Africans are represented most often as victims of difficult circumstances that accompany their establishment in Russia. While it is true for a portion of African migrants, it is by no means the case for the whole population. There is another, smaller but still distinctive and significant segment of the African migrant population in Russia, which is formed by very different people whose fortunes contrast with the representation of Africans as passive victims in the receiving society. While the economic migrants and refugees might be conventionally referred to as “common” migrants, these people might be called privileged Russian Africans. These are Africans who have found pathways toward social recognition and success in a Russian megacity and eventually managed to establish a worthy, even prestigious place for themselves in society. Almost all of these people are Soviet or Russian university alumni who have lived in Russia for at least twenty years, have obtained Russian citizenship (mainly through marriage), speak fluent Russian, know the Russian lifestyle very well, enjoy support from Russian family members and respect in their home countries, have native Russians as close friends, are happy to see their children being very well integrated into Moscow city life, and are always welcome in their motherlands’ embassies in Moscow. Some of these individuals even become their native countries’ official representatives in Russia, for example, H.E. Dr. Gabriel Anicet Kotchofa who was the Ambassador of the Republic of Benin. These Russian Africans do not have any intention of leaving Russia permanently. They are journalists, university teachers, medical doctors, translators, and so on.

Many Africans are economists, managers, and other professionals involved in, or related to different kinds of businesses, and some are successful middle-class and even upper-class entrepreneurs. It should be noted that these people were astute and smart enough to use the opportunities in the turbulent period of “wild capitalism” of the 1990s provided to those

ready to take risks and those who did not fear hardships (Bondarenko et al. 2014).

In the 2000s, Russian capitalism became much more “regular” (in fact, state-regulated and controlled), but many educated Africans still managed to make inroads in Moscow. In the younger generation, among the innumerable Africans who came to study at Russian universities and colleges in post-Soviet times, there are those who went into show business, including as musicians, singers, dancers, DJs or VJs. Nonetheless, in general, contemporary migrants to Russia face more difficulties in establishing themselves and, for example, setting up successful business ventures than those who came at the end of the Soviet period, and who could benefit from the economic and political liberalization of the late 1980s and early 1990s (Bondarenko et al. 2014).

In sum, since the early 1990s, the social composition of Africans in Russia has changed markedly and has become more heterogeneous. This is occurring simultaneously with the number of African migrants exceeding the level of being just a barely perceivable minority in Russian cities and regions, with Moscow serving as their most important hub.

Remaining African, Becoming Russian: Self-organization forms and integration strategies of African migrants in present-day Moscow

Characteristically, conscious attempts to unite at least some groups of migrants have been made, not by the neediest, but by some of the most integrated, and prosperous in the receiving society: Moscow Africans. In particular, they participate in the activities of the official (that is, registered) *Russian Migrants Federation*, which was founded in 2007 and held its First Congress in 2008 in the grandiose *President Hotel* with the State Duma (Russian Parliament) members as distinguished guests. The aims of the Federation are by no means political. Migrants, including Africans, concentrate on social projects, carefully avoiding engagement in political activism as they fear that this could hinder reaching the main goal – securing their position in the country. These Africans have consciously linked

their lives to Russia and prefer to establish and strengthen their positions in the Russian society by promoting cooperation with their Russian colleagues and other social peers rather than with compatriots who have low social status. So, affluent and struggling Africans usually use two radically different strategies to embroider themselves into the fabric of Russian society. While the latter cooperate mainly with one other, the former opt for maximum inclusion in the mainstream socio-cultural milieu.

The *House of Africa*, a non-governmental organization, which is probably the most successful large-scale project of Russia-based Africans at present, was founded in 2012 by Odunlami Serge Phocas, a Russian university alumnus from Benin. The *House of Africa* declares on its website homepage that it is, “devoted to the development and strengthening of friendly and partner relations between the peoples of Russia and Africa,” and that it is a, “[n]on-commercial partnership for the development of cultural, educational, business and public relations . . . to facilitate the process of integration of Russia in the African economic and social space through the creation of stable partnerships in civil society.”⁶ In its activities, the *House of Africa* (as well as the *Russian Migrants Federation*) relies not only on Russian partners including governmental bodies, but also on the embassies of African states in Russia. This support from different sides allows the *House of Africa* to organize important events, for example, *Afrofest* – an annual African cultural festival that attempts to familiarize native Russians with Africa and its diverse cultures.

Permanent migrants from several African countries are planning to register their own associations. A *Rwanda Diaspora to the Russian Federation* was founded on the initiative of the Rwandan Embassy in 2015. However, until December 2016 when the Guineans registered their association, the *Nigerian Community Russia* (N.C.R.), founded in the early 2000s with branches in United States Moscow and St. Petersburg, and the *Nigerians in Diaspora Organisation* (N.I.D.O.-Russia) founded later in 2007, remained the only officially registered

self-organized and self-governing associations of African migrants in Russia. These organizations have elected administrative bodies, possess official websites as well as Facebook pages, and have strong ties with the Nigerian Embassy in Moscow and with compatriots in the home country and worldwide, among other markers of a strong network.⁷ N.I.D.O.-Russia is a Chapter of the *Nigerians in Diaspora Organisation Europe* (N.I.D.O.E.), the European arm of a global network of *Nigerians in Diaspora*, with Headquarters in London. N.C.R. consists of about two hundred registered members, while N.I.D.O.-Russia counts over one hundred.

Typically for such organizations, whether registered or otherwise, in the words of the then N.I.D.O.-Russia Chairman, Dr. Bashir Obasekola (personal communication, August 23, 2013), its “members are largely . . . non-students who are already accomplished in their professions, but currently working or doing business in Russia. The focus of the organization is to mobilize Nigerian professionals and entrepreneurs living in Russia.” On the contrary, N.C.R.

Is an organization for everyone. There is no particular focus on any group.

Students, non-students, professionals or artisans are all supposed to be involved.

The relationship between NIDO and *Nigerian Community* is [a] very cordial one, since most of the members of NIDO-Russia are also activists of the *Nigerian Community* . . . Members of NIDO are mainly graduates and successful entrepreneurs . . . [and they] are also the core benefactors and avant-gardes to the *Community*.

Dr. Obasekola himself was the President of the *Nigerian Community Russia* for eight years before becoming the Chairman of the *Nigerians in Diaspora Organization Russia*. Besides registered members, both organizations have sympathizers among Nigerians residing in Russia who have doubts about the profitability of officially joining any of them due to

different reasons. In particular, as one of our interlocutors said, “Several years ago, many Nigerians were afraid of identifying themselves as a union nation; we did not trust each other. It was caused by the ethno-religious and socio-political situation in Nigeria. Even abroad it is hard [for us, Nigerians] to realize ourselves as a ‘united nation from one country with common aim’.”

As a rule, the African migrants’ associations are functioning as informal (unregistered) clubs and societies, whose aims are not only to provide their members with support and recreation in the native cultural milieu, but also to facilitate their business and social success in Russia. Such organizations involve privileged Africans almost exclusively in their activities. Generally, these informal voluntary associations are based on personal relations providing group solidarity. Such associations (as well as compatriots’ support in general, in various forms) play a positive role in the process of Africans’ integration into the Russian society (Googueva 2007:44–45, 48; Gribanova and Zherlitsyna 2012:73). “We all know the cell phone numbers of each other, know when one has a birthday. Sometimes we get together and visit one of us to talk about current news,” a member of a Cameroonian fellow-migrant association told us.

Beyond the necessity of having a legal status in the country in order to have the right to register an official organization, in fact, any organizational work demands time and money that African migrants with low social status and income cannot afford to spend freely. A result of this, the dualistic “diasporic identity”, when migrants associate themselves both with the country of origin and the country of residence (Vertovec 2000; Anderson 2001; Naujoks 2010), develops primarily among the privileged Moscow Africans who have the resources to engage in community-forming projects.

Migrants of the other category – non-privileged, economic migrants – generally remain out of this process. Not integrated into the Russian society to a sufficient degree, they

mostly retain a “one-sided”, brought from home, identity. These people have their own forms and ways of finding each other in Moscow’s megacity jungle. The social distance between the two segments of the African population in Russia is quite large, and their spheres of interaction are limited. Well-integrated and thus privileged Africans even tend to separate themselves from other migrants; in discussions, both with each other and even with interviewers, they often referred to out-group migrants as “they”, in attempts to avoid associating themselves with the less privileged migrants, including compatriots. This was despite many of our interviewees telling us they had helped struggling less affluent migrants when possible. As an example, this assistance could be in the form of providing jobs. This was before inspections looking for illegal workers became too frequent and meticulous in the second half of the 2000s.

In the USSR, there was an invisible demarcation between foreigners and native Soviet people. This distinction was not enshrined in law but it could be clearly seen in the spatial practices of Soviet-style urban planning, which was very functional in its nature. The implication was that foreign students (who in those days formed the vast majority of African residents) should spend most of their lives in dormitories and in the remote areas of the cities, while their contact with Soviet people was to be kept to the unavoidable minimum for ideological reasons. The authorities protected Soviet citizens from any foreign influence on one hand, and tried to limit the possibilities of foreigners seeing the reality of life in the country on the other. Indeed, not only people from the West but also students from the “Third World”, thought of as true friends of the Soviet Union and comrades in the anti-imperialist struggle, were disappointed with the Soviet reality, especially because it was at odds with the ideology which declared the USSR as the country of complete freedom, while political and cultural isolationism, ideological pressure, disregard for human rights were part of the norms of everyday life. Several former Soviet African students told us how they had been shocked

by this reality (Matusevich 2012; Katsakioris 2014). Today, both state ideology and social composition of African migrants are different. However, no “ethnic” (with clear numerical and cultural domination of non-Russian inhabitants) neighborhoods have been formed in modern Moscow. Africans are scattered all over the city and the city region, though there seems to be a trend to the concentration of economic migrants. The poorest and socially lowest south-eastern and eastern outskirts and suburbs of the city house African migrants, while Moscow’s south-western outskirts, where the international Peoples’ Friendship University of Russia is situated, remain the center of attraction for African students and graduates.

Churches and mosques situated in different parts of Moscow are examples of another type of institution around which a significant number of African migrants gather, although far from all attend church or mosque regularly, especially among those more socially established and financially well-off, who have less need of the moral or practical support a religious institution can provide. African Orthodox Christians (almost exclusively Ethiopians), as well as Sunni Muslims may visit the same churches or mosques attended by native Russian citizens of different ethnic origins and cultural traditions, and, should they choose to do so, may try to establish informal relations with the respective religious community or parish members. At the same time, there also are several Catholic and Protestant (Lutheran, Anglican, and other) churches in Moscow, as well as quite a number of churches of “new” Protestant congregations, including Africans (created and led by African preachers), which are active in Russia.⁸ The social backgrounds of their parishes are mixed, and include many individuals who are not well-established in the Russian society in either practical or psychological terms. The role played by such churches in the integration of the Africans is ambivalent. On the one hand, as is the case elsewhere (Okome 2002:17–24; Arthur 2008:94–102; Olupona and Gemignani 2009; Agbali 2012:86–92), these churches help African

migrants in Russia by giving them consolation and support (sometimes – even in connection with the problem of racism), providing them with feelings of security and stability, and creating an atmosphere in which they can express and reproduce the values of their native cultures, thereby maintaining their cultural identities.⁹ On the other hand, affiliation with these churches raises an additional barrier in the migrants' journey to integration in the cultural milieu of the receiving country, and so promotes their parishioners' continued seclusion from the wider Russian society (Shakhbazyan 2010). Not by chance are they often called “foreign churches” in the media and by the public, these churches have no roots in mainstream Russian culture, and are perceived by the overwhelming majority of the country's native citizens as completely alien. In the light of their more politicized than truly religious minds, these churches are often seen as the enemy's agents in the “eternal” and irresolvable opposition between Russia (inseparable from Orthodox Christianity) and the West (symbolized by Catholicism and Protestantism).

Africans also meet in specific nightclubs, cafés, and restaurants. Naturally, there are the more and less prestigious among these places. Typical regular visitors of some of them are African students and migrants with a modest, but stable, and at least “more or less” legal income. The most popular café of this sort is *Avenue*, situated on the periphery of the city, on the campus of the Peoples' Friendship University of Russia, and run by Tefera Yehuala Wasie, an old alumnus from Ethiopia, and his Russian wife Anna. This small café has a democratic atmosphere and rather low prices. It is less known by Russians than it is by Africans who use it as a meeting place where they can socialize with each other, immerse themselves in a familiar cultural atmosphere and express their identities freely. While in Soviet times dormitories were the main places used for socializing for both African and Russian students, for Africans now, this café has become such a place. As the café proprietor's Russian wife said, “Here is a place where no one will judge.” In other words,

Avenue gives Africans a sense of home and of belonging to a community, which becomes a lived experience of that particular locality. Besides, *Avenue* is also the place where the Ethiopian community holds meetings every Saturday. In this manner, *Avenue* has become more than just a local eatery on the outskirts of the capital city. The lavish *Addis Ababa* restaurant in the prestigious Downtown is the second of the two Moscow eateries that are run by Africans. *Addis Ababa* also belongs to Ethiopian graduates of Soviet and Russian universities, a brother and a sister, and is primarily visited by well-off Russians and Western expatriates; only a handful of the most successful Moscow Africans are among its *habitués* (Bondarenko et al. 2014).

Although Africans in Moscow usually have acquaintances among people from different African countries, the basic level of their integration is with the culture and people of their country of origin, and not with those from the same ethnic or regional origins (whether within their country or within the African continent), or with any other kind of group. The answer to the question, “Are you divided by ethnic groups here in Moscow?” by an Ethiopian respondent is characteristic in this respect, “Here – no. Not like in Ethiopia”. As for pan-African sentiments, they may be present as a virtual frame for distinguishing “us” from “them” in the “white” cultural milieu. The sense of pan-African unity is rather loose among Russian Africans, and exists mainly because, from the point of view of most native Russians, all these people are (and will probably always be) seen as “the Africans” – that is, as members of a single African community. As a rule, these sentiments do not lead to the emergence of stable, nationally mixed informal or formal groups, clubs or societies. This is especially true of the cases when the European languages spoken in the African migrants’ home countries are different, although practically all our respondents declared that they were ready to offer informal help to any African from any state.

This conclusion seems equally true of both categories of Africans in Russia, except

sometimes in cases of an ongoing tension between ethnic groups in the migrants' home country. In these cases, if mutual dislike is so strong that it is irresistible even in another country, the representatives of conflicting groups may use the tactics of more- or-less strict mutual avoidance. On the other hand, if problems in interpersonal relations become grave and begin to threaten the tranquility of the whole community, its most authoritative members try to pacify those quarreling by encouraging them to realize that while in their home country they may divide themselves into groups according to ethnicity, when they are abroad, they must feel that they are people of one nation and behave accordingly. During the research, Cameroonians, Nigerians, and others repeatedly told us about such situations.

The aforesaid is also applicable to African students, the official temporal migrants. In particular, there are several organizations of students from Nigeria and Cameroon (*Association of Nigerian Federal Scholarship Students in Russia, The Nigerian Students Union of the Peoples' Friendship University of Russia, Association of the Cameroonian Students in Moscow, Association of the Cameroonian Students in Russia, etc.*). It can happen that for some members of such unions, ethnic origin really matters, but, as a leader of a Cameroonian student association said, "We try to stop them immediately . . . We tell them, 'There, in the home country, you may divide but we have come here, and here we are all together!'" Characteristically, there is no Moscow pan-African association; Africans from different countries are connected with each other mostly either interpersonally or within wider migrant organizations like the *Russian Migrants Federation*. The pan-African association of the international Peoples' Friendship University of Russia (called the *Association of the Peoples' Friendship University of Russia African Students*) is designed as a federation of the separate African countries' student unions. Furthermore, it must be emphasized that the association was created only in 1995, while the first national African student union appeared immediately after the University's founding in 1960. As the early

activists of the association recall and openly admit, only the hardships of the 1990s (in most of the African states and in Russia), which made foreign students' lives extremely difficult, pushed the University's African national student unions to integration.

Conclusion: The “African Diaspora(s)”?

This article highlights both some similarities and – especially – important differences between the situation of the African migrants in Russia and in many other (particularly Western European and North American) countries. One of the most important differences is the extent to which Africans in Russia and the West are integrated into diaspora communities. We agree with Aihwa Ong (2003:87) that, “the old meaning of diaspora – of being scattered or in dispersion . . . is too limiting an analytical concept to capture the multiplicity of vectors and agendas associated with the majority of contemporary border crossings.” Diaspora communities must not be seen uncritically and assumed to be homogeneous, but rather should be analyzed in the transnational context of the present day in which they emerge, partly as constructs, “as a category of practice, project, claim and stance” (Brubaker 2005:13), and special attention must be paid to their dynamic and fluid nature, which makes them networked and heterogeneous in many respects (Braziel and Mannur 2003; Tsagarousianou 2004; Dufoix 2008).

We approach the diaspora community not simply as, “the offspring of an area, who have spread to many lands” (Kottak 2002:501), or a “dispersed group living outside a homeland” (Fogelson 2006:1116), but as a network community that serves as a means of both more successful establishment in the receiving society and of pre-migration identity support. Due to numerous and various visible and invisible connections among its members, it forms a distributed social unit, without a single shared fixed territory (a *status in statu*) within a wider society. From this perspective, we argue that the process of diaspora formation among

Africans in Russia in general, and Moscow in particular, is developing slowly (Bondarenko et al. 2009:92–96). Many people remain completely, or almost completely, excluded from it since their social ties are limited to a narrow circle of their immediate acquaintances. Most often, this is a consequence of their objective circumstances (such as unofficial migrants' necessary "clandestinity") but sometimes it is also due to an individual's own wishes.

At present, no single "African diaspora community" in the sense of community suggested by Anthony Cohen (1985), which exists without any necessary links to a certain place or regular gatherings, is emerging in Russia. The homogenizing perception on the vast part of native Russians as a single African community – "the Africans" – can to some extent stimulate the strengthening of the ties between Africans of different ethnic and even national origins (Manotskov 1995:188). However, our analysis shows that the real situation is far from that envisioned by a typical Muscovite. What can really be observed today among Moscow (and generally Russian) Africans, is a rather weak trend toward the formation of internally diversified (by ethnic or regional origin, religion, and social status) national diaspora communities. The Nigerians have definitely advanced furthest in this respect and are likely followed by the Cameroonians, Ethiopians, and Ivorians.

The sense of pan-African unity in these national communities is quite loose. Its existence is predicated on the opinion of native Russians that all of the migrants are members of a single "African community." The sense of pan-African unity may manifest itself mainly in cases of either a common emergency, such as the necessity of resisting racist attacks (Manotskov 1995; Allina-Pisano and Allina-Pisano 2007; Bondarenko et al. 2009), or attempts to demonstrate to the wider Moscow society the richness of African cultures at African festivals and fairs (at which, however, each national community occupies its own pavilion).

It would be instructive to compare the situation in Russia to that in other countries.

Our experience allows us to compare it with the situation in the United States, in different parts of which we did fieldwork during 2013–15 (Bondarenko 2016). Based on field research in the two countries, we argue that, despite all differences, the very pattern of African communities in Russia and the United States is generally the same, but in the United States, similar processes within these communities are proceeding faster. Although extensive migration from Africa to the United States began at almost the same time as Russia became more open to foreigners (mid-1980s and especially 1990s), currently, there are many more African permanent residents in the United States than in the Russian Federation. Although the proportion is gradually changing in the United States, well-educated middle class Africans dominate even numerically over poorly educated lower class African migrants. For these and some other reasons related to fundamental distinctions between American and Russian societies and states, as we believe, Diasporas as network communities have already emerged among recent migrants to the United States from many African countries. This is not a single “African diaspora” but Ghanaian, Senegalese, Ethiopian, and other national Diasporas. So, what is already a fact in the United States is still a “work in progress” in Russia, but it is obvious that the process is moving in the same direction.

As with Russia, relationships within African communities in the United States are not conflict-free, they are extremely heterogeneous and internally fragmented – ethnically, religiously, socially, politically. However, the United States far exceeds Russia in the number, variety, and role for the communities of the associations founded by African migrants. There are over a dozen Ghanaian associations in only one relatively small city of Columbus in Ohio (Agbemabiese n.d.) – this is hardly less than the number of associations of Africans in Moscow. The larger number of Africans in the United States, when compared with Russia, is facilitated by the more advanced development of civil society living, which makes the United States better suited to accommodate such associations. As a result, although

some scholars write about the “invisibility” of Africans in American society and thus, in mass consciousness and intellectual discourse (Arthur 2000; Hintzen and Rahier 2003; Okure 2011:5), they are definitely more visible than Africans in Russia. Nonetheless, today, Africans are becoming increasingly more visible in both countries.

What is most specific about the situation with Africans in Russia (and particularly in Moscow), is the historical background of the role that social factors play in slowing the formation of African diasporas even at the national level. These factors are quite significant, though usually underestimated (and thus, understudied) compared with ethnicity or religion. The social factor manifests itself in the social differences between the Africans who came to Russia as students many years ago and remained there, and the Africans coming nowadays as economic migrants or political refugees. These differences draw a bold dividing line within every African national community and serve as a salient feature at the pan-African level. An important outcome of this is that while the African migrants denoted here as privileged are cultivating a Diaspora identity and successfully seeking deep integration into Russian society, African economic migrants most often have to remain excluded from the Russian social and cultural mainstream and limit themselves to mere adaptation to life in Moscow. This sharp division of African migrants into the two groups is a direct consequence of political, social, economic, and cultural differences between the Soviet Union and the Russian Federation. Due to the aforementioned reasons, majority of privileged Moscow Africans are originally “Soviet Africans” who came as students and were welcomed, while the economic migrants are exclusively “post-Soviet”. The liberalization of the entry regime allowed them to arrive in Russia, much to general dismay. Economic migrants could never appear in the USSR, while the Russian Federation accepts many fewer potential privileged Russian Africans than the Soviet Union did since the early 1960s.

Far from being homogeneous not only nationally and ethnically but also socially,

Africans are making very different inroads in the Moscow socio-cultural environment. While a part of them, mainly those who came to the Soviet Union or Russian Federation as students, have successfully integrated, others – the more recent newcomers, among whom there are many economic migrants and political refugees, face serious difficulties. At all their social and cultural diversity, today, natives of Africa are becoming increasingly visible in Moscow. There are good reasons to believe that in the future, they will become even more visible.

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Bio-sketch

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NOTES

¹ See, e.g., http://www.bbc.com/russian/russia/2012/10/121018_russia_debts_writeoff (accessed July 8, 2016).

² Among many studies of contemporary Russian racism, the one deserving special attention as most grounded and profound is the two-volume monograph by Victor Shnirelman (2011). On racist attitude to, and discrimination of Africans in post-Soviet Russia, see Boltovskaja 2014: 187–204.

³ The official name of the university since 1992 is People’s Friendship University of Russia (*Rossijskij universitet družby narodov, RUDN*). Founded for the purposes of educating students from so-called “Third World” countries in 1960, it was officially named after the Congolese hero in 1961–92. However, most Russian citizens, as well as people worldwide, still call it the “Lumumba University.”

⁴ On most recent updates in the immigration legislation, see: Artamonov 2015.

⁵ On the Soviet ideology of internationalism that made the acceptance of Africans mandatory, see: Katsakioris 2006; Matusевич 2008a (cf. with regards to Latin America: Rupprecht 2015).

⁶ <http://african-house.com/ru/dom-afriki> (accessed February 28, 2016).

⁷ <http://nigeriancommunity.ru/>, <https://www.facebook.com/Nigerian.Community.Russia/>, <http://nidorussia.com/>, <https://www.facebook.com/nidorussia?fref=ts>; naturally for our time, many unregistered organizations of Africans in Russia also have their pages on Facebook; for example – The Ivorian Community in Russia: <https://www.facebook.com/Ивуарийская-община-в-России-582666751757954/?fref=ts> (all accessed February 28, 2016). The Internet plays a very important role as a means of both self-organization and, not less significantly, self-representation of Africans living in Russia, including Moscow (Serov 2008).

⁸ However, the law passed in July 2016 (so called “Yarovaya’s law”, by the name of its main

proponent) can complicate the activities of all religious organizations in the country, but especially of non-Orthodox Christians.

⁹ In particular, *Moscow Protestant Chaplaincy* established in 2001 the *Task Force against Racism*. “Members of the Task Force interview and counsel victims of racially motivated attacks, and publish results in quarterly and annual reports” (<http://mpcrussia.org/> [accessed July 10, 2016]).