

# IMR Country Report – Nigerian Migration to Russia: Accommodation and Discrimination in a Post-Soviet Society

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## Abstract

This *IMR* Country Report examines Nigerian migration to Russia, exploring the changes in this migration stream from a flow driven by educational motivations during the Soviet era to one shaped by economic and family-reunion reasons after the Soviet Union's dissolution. In doing so, it offers insights into the social realities of Nigerian migrants living in Russia. The research discussed here included interviews with 25 Nigerian migrants living in Moscow and focused on their challenges and strategies in obtaining housing. As it shows, apartment owners in Moscow exhibited ethnic and racial biases against Nigerian migrants, who also faced rental contract constraints, due to incomplete migratory documentation. This *IMR* Country Report highlights a contradiction between Russian government policies and apartment owners' preferences and willingness to accommodate and apply for registration on behalf of Nigerian migrants. It adds to understandings of the conditions faced by sub-Saharan African migrants regarding access to housing in an understudied destination and to barriers to social integration that sub-Saharan African migrants encounter in Russia.

## Keywords

Nigerian migrants, discrimination, housing, Russia

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## **Introduction**

Migration has increased the multi-cultural structure of societies across the globe (Pakulski and Markowski 2014; Czaika and Haas 2014). However, host societies' attitudes toward minority groups differs from place to place, particularly for migrant minority groups (Bessudnov and Shcherbak 2019). Since the Soviet Union's collapse in 1991, Russia has welcomed migrants from across the former Soviet Bloc, as well as from other countries (Lazareva 2015). According to the last census in 2010, Russia's foreign-born population accounted for 8 percent of the total population (OECD 2019b). However, majority of the migrant populations in Russia is from former Soviet states such as Kazakhstan (22 percent), Ukraine (26 percent), and Uzbekistan (10 percent) (OECD 2019b; Lazareva 2015). A report by Russian Statistics (2020) showed that the African migrant population in Russia is very small and categorized as "Others." Despite the small number of Africans in Russia, their population is increasing.

Migration for Nigerians is often a way to escape poverty, unemployment, insecurity, low wages, and poor education standards, among other challenges persisting in the country (Amao, Awoyemi and Ogunleye 2009; Olubiyi and Olarinde 2015). In contrast to dynamics during the Soviet era, when Nigerians came to the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics (USSR) to study, since the Soviet dissolution, Russia has become a place where Africans come for economic or family reasons (Oni 2020). Although the Nigerian population in Russia is growing, North America and Western Europe remain the most popular destinations for Nigerians (McAuliffe and Khadria 2019). However, the ease of obtaining a Russian visa, compared to the process in Western European and North American countries, contributes to increasing migration from Nigeria to Russia (Shannon 2020). The sheer size of the Russian territory and its shared borders with many countries also compel many Nigerians to think of Russia as a transit site in an attempt to reach Europe (Bondarenko 2017).

Failure to secure passage to Western Europe, however, ensures that many Nigerian migrants get stuck in Russia, where they struggle to eke out a living (Bondarenko 2017). The transition from the Soviet period, when the housing system was controlled by the state, to a mortgage system in which an individual can purchase a house through a loan has changed the structure of housing accessing for all migrants in Russia (Zavisca 2012). Apartments that were formerly owned and controlled by the Soviet state became privately owned in 1992 (Guzanova 1999), allowing apartments owners to determine the prices of their apartments and the type of people they wanted to occupy them. This situation led to some categories of people being deprived of the possibility to rent apartments (Kovpak 2015).

In their analysis of social distance and minority ethnic groups in the Netherlands, Hagendoorn and Hraba (1987) identified the black ethnic group as the most

unprivileged ethnic groups, occupying the lowest position in their ethnic hierarchy. The same pattern is prevalent in post-Soviet Russia, where the majority often openly or covertly show discomfort and annoyance in their interactions with African migrants (Gasparishvili and Onosov 2016). To eradicate any form of discrimination and to curb the victimization of the black population, Russian law, as detailed in Article 5.62 of Russia's Code of Administrative Offenses and Criminal Code Article 136, grants equal rights and freedom to people, regardless of their place of origin (Valtseva 2018). Despite the promulgation of laws barring discriminatory behavior, Nigerian migrants interviewed in the research discussed here experienced discrimination in trying to rent apartments in the Russian Federation. In this *IMR* Country Report, I examine their experiences and focus on the strategies they employed to obtain apartments in Russia, drawing on the first study to consider the housing situation of Nigerian and African migrants in Russia.

This *IMR* Country Report also aims to contribute to the immense literature on the social integration of international migrants through the lens of housing (Fang and van Liempt 2020; Wu 2002; Meijering 2018; Carlsson and Eriksson 2015). It argues that understanding the shift in the housing system from the Soviet era to post-Soviet Russia, and especially this transition's impact on the host community's attitudes toward Nigerian migrants, is important because such attitudes reflect preexisting negative sentiment toward black migrants in the Soviet era. Demintseva (2017) identifies the housing market and state regulatory policies as factors that either facilitate or impede migrant integration in the host country. Housing is an important social need for both locals and migrants, as it both provides a physical haven and impacts individuals' health and livelihood sources (Greenburg and Polzer 2008). The Universal Declaration of Human Rights and International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights states that "Everyone has the right to a standard of living adequate for the health and well-being of himself and his family, including food, clothing, housing" (OHCHR 1966). Additionally, Article 40 of the Russian Constitution states that "Everyone shall have the right to a home. No one may be arbitrarily deprived of his or her home." In practice, however, migrants, particularly those from marginalized or stigmatized groups, experience difficulties in accessing housing in Russia. Despite the laws that guarantee migrants' access to housing, the discrimination experienced by Nigerian migrants in Russia raises the question of whether they truly have the right to access their social needs or 'to a home.'

To develop these ideas, this *IMR* Country Report, first, traces the wider relationship between Russia and Nigeria. Second, it describes the methodological approach that guided this research. Third, I describe the challenges Nigerian migrants face in securing housing in Moscow, as well as the strategies they employ to circumvent those hurdles. The concluding section explains why the wider relationship between Nigeria and Russia is important in understanding the social interactions between Russians and Nigerian migrants and in making sense of the host

population's attitude toward the latter. The conclusion also reflects on the implications of Nigerian migrants' difficulties accessing housing for wider immigrant integration (or exclusion) in Russia.

## **Historical Background**

The territorial division of the African continent spearheaded at the Berlin Conference between 1884 and 1885 ushered in an era of colonization of areas now known as Nigeria, Ghana, Kenya, Democratic Republic of Congo, Cameroon, Togo, Senegal, and so on (Hargreaves 1960; De Blij and Muller 2009; Mackenzie 1983). Although the imperial Russian state participated in the Conference, it was not involved in the partition of Africa (Adetokunbo 2017), which was shaped instead by European superpowers, all of which became major colonial holdings in Africa (De Blij and Muller 2009). Great Britain in particular became a dominant power during the colonial period in Africa, straddling different parts of the continent (Mackenzie 1983). In West Africa, the Gambia, Sierra Leone, Ghana (then Gold Coast), and Nigeria were subjugated to British colonial rule (De Blij and Muller 2009).

Nigeria became a British protectorate in 1900, and after about six decades of British colonial rule, it became independent in 1960 (Falola and Heaton 2008). Prior to the declaration of Nigeria's independence, the Soviet government was vocal in calling for an end to colonialism in Africa (Papp 1976; Donaldson 1982). Nigeria, in fact, received more attention from the Soviet government than any other country in West Africa (Stent 1973; Ojo 1976). At the onset of independence, Nigeria, like many other African countries, was welcomed into a bi-polar global melee of the Cold War (Stent 1973). Western propaganda was instrumental in attempts to make Nigeria more pro-West, despite the fact that it was a signatory to the non-alignment movement pact (Waliyullahi 2016; Ojo 1976). In the early 1960s, shortly after political independence, Nigeria was active and consistent in promoting anti-Soviet sentiment across sub-Saharan Africa, resulting in a strained relationship between the two countries (Stent 1973).

The Nigerian civil war between 1967 and 1970 presented an opportunity for the two countries to renew their relationship (Agubamah 2014). In a quest to rescue the newly independent state of Nigeria from breaking up, the USSR became the major arms supplier to the Nigerian government throughout the period of the crisis (Ogunbadejo 1988). By the end of the conflict, the two countries had established a relationship through a range of bilateral agreements (Adetokunbo 2017; Waliyullahi 2016; Agubamah 2014) which resulted in the opening of Soviet borders to Nigerian students (Adetokunbo 2017) to apply for Soviet scholarships and acquire technical skills in different Soviet universities (Ojo 1976; Stent 1973).

Before the Soviet Union's dissolution, Nigerian migrants in the USSR were either students or government representatives (Bondarenko et al. 2009). Following the

Soviet Union's disintegration, however, Russia witnessed an increased migration flow, particularly from former Soviet countries (Timur 2016; Zaionchkovskaya, Mkrтчian and Tyuryukanova 2014). The USSR's breakup also afforded some Nigerians present in Russia the chance to change their status from student migrants to either migrant workers or citizens through marriage, leading to a steady increase in migration of Nigerians to Russia for economic reasons (Oni 2020). Between 1997 and 2019, Russian statistics estimate that about 4,230 Nigerians arrived in the Russian Federation (ROSSTAT, 2020).<sup>1</sup> Together with the opening of Russian borders in the post-Soviet era, there were changes in Russian migration policies to accommodate the country's political dynamics after the USSR's disintegration and to create measures that guaranteed the country's hegemony vis-à-vis other former Soviet republics (Leal and Rodríguez 2016; Aggarwal and Govella 2012; Chawryło 2012; Doff 2011). Factors such as Russia's quest to become economically competitive in the global environment and its shrinking working population have necessitated changes in Russia's migration policies (Chudinovskikh and Denisenko 2017). Nonetheless, effective implementation of Russian policies to facilitate and promote the principle of recognition, tolerance, and acceptance of migrants within the social and economic arena has been lacking (Matveevskaya and Pogodin 2018).

## Methodology

Although there has been some scholarly attention to African *student* migrants in Russia (Carew 2015; Matusevich 2009a; Womack 1995; Lambroschini 2004), African *labor* migrants in Russia have received far less attention, especially from Russian academics, not least because the African community in Russia is quite small and dispersed among different regions in Russia (MIA 2021). In addition, most available research and writing on this group have been done by Russian scholars (Bondarenko et al. 2014; 2009; Dmitri Bondarenko, Shakhbazyan and Serov 1996; Matusevich 2008a, 2008b, 2009a, 2009b; Katsakioris 2017, 2019).

The research presented here works to fill that gap and draws on 25 interviews conducted in 2020 with Nigerian labor migrants living in Moscow. Four interviewees were women, of whom two were married to Nigerians and two were unmarried, while 21 interviewees were men, of whom five were married to Russian partners, four were separated from their Russian partners, six were married to Nigerians, and six were unmarried. Respondents were selected based on the following criteria: (a) identifying as Nigerian, (b) having lived in Russia for more than two years, (c) being familiar with the process of renting an apartment in Moscow, and (d) having lived or currently living in a rented apartment. To achieve all these criteria, a

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<sup>1</sup>This statistic does not specify the number of arrivals per person. An individual could be counted multiple times. Unfortunately, this figure cannot be trusted.

snowball technique and making acquaintances during community meetings, birthday parties, and church assemblies were used to select respondents. Interviews were conducted in English, and I used a computer-assisted qualitative data analysis software *nvivo* to analyze interview transcripts. I created a category “Housing” with the following sub-categories: “Renting apartment,” “Relationship with landlords,” “Cost of apartment,” and “Apartment sharing.” To determine treatment based on discrimination, I created another category, “Discrimination,” with sub-categories “Experienced discrimination” and “Not given apartment.”

### “Slavs Only”

For many migrants, particularly those of African descent, coming across such words in Moscow is not strange, as migrants bias existed long before the arrival of African labor migrants in Russia (Laruelle 2021; Doolotkeldieva 2008; Kuznetsova and Round 2019; Gerber and Zavisca 2020). African migrants’ quest to find an apartment in Moscow involves looking through various online platforms, such as Yandex, Cian, Avito, The Locals, Gdeetodom, and Kvatirant. According to Kovpak (2015), open discrimination is evident in many advertisements on these websites, with racial bias particularly pronounced toward people of non-Slavic descent. However, black migrants experienced a dire situation in getting accommodation. As one Nigerian migrant put it, *“You see many adverts when you are looking for an apartment, but reading further, you will see ‘Slavs only,’ which is telling you that if you are black, you are not needed”* (Nigerian, male, aged 31, teacher, arrived in Russia in 2011). Although, the use of the inscription “Slav only” started before the increase in African migration and originally targeted people from the Caucasus and Central Asia (Laruelle 2021), many African migrants felt that black migrants were the landlords’ main target with such stipulation and that such attitudes limited their chances of getting an apartment. According to another respondent, *“It will take the double of the efforts of an African to get accommodation compared to the effort of a European”* (Nigerian, male, aged 56, business owner, arrived in Russia in 1987). This cognitive and emotional acknowledgment that for a black person in Russia, the likelihood of experiencing difficult situations is greater is, of course, grounded in Russian perceptions of Africans as “poor” (Bondarenko et al. 2014).

Similarly, another respondent said that *“when you have your money, you can get accommodation here in Russia, but color plays a huge role in getting accommodation”* (Nigerian, male, aged 32, self-employed, arrived in Russia in 2008). This lucid assertion identifies skin color as an important barometer through which apartment owners determined who could rent from them. As one respondent described the situation,

I can say that getting accommodation is difficult for foreigners generally, but there are some situations where being an African is a major factor. I have been in situations where at the point of meeting the owners of the flat, either the husband or the wife, and in some cases, both of them would refuse to give me the flat. (Nigerian, male, aged 36, driver, arrived in Russia in 2001)

Overall, then, migrants in Russia often experience difficulties in obtaining apartments (Kovpak 2015) but race, especially blackness, created an even more substantial barrier to getting an apartment in Russia, as Nigerian respondents faced more difficult situations than people with European backgrounds.

## Rental Contract Constraints

As in other cosmopolitan cities around the world, in Moscow, apartment's standards vary. However, the high cost of housing, along with the paperwork required to get an apartment, make it difficult for Nigerian migrants to rent housing. Although location is an important determinant of apartments' cost, most rental flats in Moscow are furnished, making them expensive and complicating the process of getting them. According to one respondent, "*The paperwork to get accommodation is not easy for most black people because the houses are furnished already*" (Nigerian, male, aged 41, arrived in Russia in 2008). As part of the documentation needed to rent an apartment, landlords and agencies in Moscow request identification documents, such as a passport and proof of a visa or residence permit, from tenants (Angloinfo, 2020). In some cases, they also ask for proof of employment (Expatica, 2020). Nigerian labor migrants in Russia, however, are mostly self-employed and often viewed migrating to Russia as a transit strategy to reach European countries (Bondarenko 2017). For such migrants, getting all the necessary paperwork becomes particularly difficult.

One way around this problem was to use a white surrogate or to marry a Russian partner, to ease the problem of getting an apartment. Nigerians with Russian wives, for example, did not have difficulties in getting apartments, as their wives played significant roles that eased frictions with apartment owners.<sup>2</sup> In the words of one interviewee married to a Russian partner,

Getting an apartment is very easy. There are many ways that you can find an apartment. You check the various websites that are into such business, then you get in touch with one of their agents who will give you different options of the types of the apartment that are available based on the area you want. (Nigerian, male, aged 58, lawyer, arrived in Russia in 1989)

Another constraint that many Nigerian migrants faced when searching for housing was having a visa registration slip - a migration registration of foreigners at their place of residence. This visa registration slip is a form of migration control that

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<sup>2</sup> All married women interviewed for this study had Nigerian spouses; thus, I cannot affirm the experiences of Nigerian women who married Russian men. However, one can infer a similar situation to that of Nigerian men with Russian wives, as the women interviewed for this study shared similar experiences in getting an apartment in Russia.

shows the period of stay, place of residence, and sponsor institution for migrants, as migration law in Russia requires all foreigners to be registered at their place of residence within seven days of arrival to process the visa registration slip (HSE University 2020; MIA 2021). Without registration, the chances of being legally employed in Russia are limited because of heavy fines for companies that employ foreigners who do not have the visa registration slip (Ryazantsev 2010). Without the visa registration slip, foreign residents have no legal rights and can be arrested by the police (Rybakovsky and Ryazantsev 2005). The policy regarding the issuance of the registration was modified in 2018 and requires landlords to apply for a visa registration slip on behalf of their tenants (Nikiforova and Brednikova 2018). However, many landlords are unwilling to go through the visa registration process and choose, instead, to rent their apartments to Russians (Russia ESL Jobs 2020). Landlords' unwillingness to apply for migrant visa registration on behalf of tenants is a major impediment to Nigerian migrants' ability to secure accommodation and a signed rental agreement. As one respondent shared,

Some landlords do not give a contract, and in such cases, it is difficult for one to fight one's case. For employment, as foreigners, you will need a registration which is issued by the Ministry of Immigration with the submission of application by the landlord, and in a case where a contract is not signed, it will be difficult to get such. (Nigerian, female, aged 35, teacher, arrived in Russia in 2013)

This policy requiring migrants to apply for registration from their place of residence has limited the chances of many Nigerian migrants to get an apartment and put black migrants at their landlords' mercy. It has also limited Nigerian migrants' chances to be formally employed in Russia because the law does not allow companies to employ migrants without complete documents (Dianova 2015; VFBS 2020).

## Strategies to Access Accommodation

The African population in Moscow is small and relies heavily on their social networks, through which apartment seekers are referred to agents who can help them find suitable apartments. In the words of one respondent,

When I was looking for an apartment, I was telling everybody around me, and someone linked me up with an agent back then. He told me that the agent has helped a lot of Africans, especially Nigerians, to look for accommodation and she's very good. (Nigerian, male, aged 33, teacher, arrived in Russia in 2017)

Another method of bypassing the constraints experienced by Nigerian migrants seeking housing is to use a person from a different racial origin. As one respondent stated, "*It is not easy to secure a place without the influence of a white person*" (Nigerian, male, aged 41, arrived in Russia in 2007). Having someone of a different



ethnic origin as a proxy to get an apartment is common among those with Russian spouses. In other situations, however, migrants share an apartment as a means to circumvent the hurdle posed by signing an agreement, as well as to cope with Moscow's expensive housing. According to one participant,

When I was trying to move to Moscow, a friend helped me to get in contact with someone who placed an announcement on Facebook that he needed a roommate. I spoke with the person, and we shared the payment of the flat. We were three living together in the apartment, and we divided the money equally among ourselves. (Nigerian, male, aged 36, arrived in Russia in 2017)

## Conclusion

This *IMR* Country Report's main conclusion is that despite laws against arbitrary deprivation of housing in Russia, various indicators reveal the predicaments faced by Nigerian migrants when searching for accommodation. Compared to some preferred migration destinations for Nigerian migrants, such as the United Kingdom, United States, Canada, and Italy (Afolayan 2009; OECD 2019a; UN DESA 2013), Russia's contact with Nigerian migrants traces only to the early 1960s, when the first Nigerian beneficiaries of the Soviet scholarships migrated to the USSR (Adetokunbo 2017; Omotade 2012). During the Soviet era, Nigeria students could access free meals at the university canteen, free health care, and accommodations in the university dormitories (Alexey 2014), thereby limiting their exposure to and interactions with local Soviet society. Post-Soviet dissolution, however, Nigerian migrants now come into a society that has little information about them (Oni 2020). The lack of social interactions between Russians and Nigerian migrants, a transition away from Soviet housing policy, and long-standing anti-blackness in Russia make it difficult for Nigerian migrants to successfully navigate Moscow's housing market.

The ethnic preference that landlords display in choosing renters reveals the discrimination to which Nigerian migrants are exposed in their search for housing. Marrying a Russian partner is one way to mitigate the challenges posed by such ethnic preference, as is using a person with a different ethnic background as a surrogate to avoid direct contact with apartment owners or relying on migrants' social networks. As a result of low wages among Nigerian migrants, sharing apartments is also prevalent.

This *IMR* Country Report has attempted to demonstrate the discrimination and constraints experienced by Nigerian migrants in obtaining housing in Russia and to highlight some of the strategies employed by migrants to secure housing. The contradiction between Article 5.62 of Russia's Code of Administrative Offenses and Criminal Code Article 136, which grant equal rights and freedom to people irrespective of their origin and status, and the preference of apartment owners, who are often reluctant to rent to Nigerian migrants, reveals the need to facilitate local acceptance

and recognition of other racial groups in Russia. Though the Nigerian population in Russia is small, it shows a familiar trend in migrant challenges and strategies in accessing accommodation (Wu 2002; Zohry 2009; Fang and van Liempt 2020). According to Bondarenko (2017), it is difficult for Nigerian and other African migrants to adapt to life in Russia. The findings of this *IMR* Report call for a pragmatic approach to including African migrants within Russia's social and economic spaces to facilitate their acceptance among Russians. Building on the research discussed here, a wider focus on African migrants living in Moscow would expand understandings of this group of migrants, as would comparative study of African migrants living in different Russian cities.

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