

INSTITUTIONAL TRANSFORMATION OF MIGRATION GOVERNANCE IN THE RUSSIAN FEDERATION: FROM ADMINISTRATIVE REGULATION TO SECURITIZATION AND POLITICAL CONTROL

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Received: June 21, 2026 | Revised: June 29, 2026 | Accepted: June 30, 2026

UDC 351.756:323.28(470+571)

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.33445/psssj.2026.7.2.7>

Abstract

Purpose. To identify the main stages in the institutional transformation of the migration governance system in the Russian Federation between 1992 and 2026 and to determine how changes in the organizational status, subordination, and powers of the Federal Migration Service affected the balance between the administrative-service, control, and security functions of state migration policy. **Method.** The study employs a historical-institutional approach, process tracing, structural-functional analysis, and comparative temporal analysis. The empirical basis comprises regulatory and legal acts defining the status and competence of migration authorities in the Russian Federation, scholarly studies on migration governance and securitization, and reports of the Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights concerning the application of Russian administrative and legal mechanisms in the temporarily occupied territories of Ukraine. **Findings.** Four stages in the development of Russian migration governance are identified: institutional establishment and a socio-administrative orientation in 1992–2001; the integration of migration functions into the system of the Ministry of Internal Affairs in 2002–2011; the organizational autonomization of the Federal Migration Service in 2012–2016; and the reintegration of migration governance into the Ministry of Internal Affairs following the abolition of the Federal Migration Service in 2016. The findings demonstrate that these structural reorganizations did not constitute a linear transition from a “social” to a “repressive” institution. Nevertheless, they created conditions for the gradual predominance of control and security functions over service-oriented functions. **Theoretical implications.** The study refines the application of the securitization concept to the analysis of migration policies pursued by authoritarian states. **Practical implications.** The findings may be used to assess the risks faced by foreign nationals and residents of the temporarily occupied territories as a result of the application of Russian migration, registration, and citizenship procedures. **Article type:** Theoretical-analytical and historical-institutional article.

Key words: Migration Governance; Federal Migration Service; Securitization of Migration; Citizenship; Political Control; Authoritarian Regime; Forced Passportization; Russian Federation.

Introduction

Migration governance is a field of public policy in which the administrative provision of services is combined with the regulation of population movements, the legal status of foreign nationals, residence registration, the granting of citizenship, asylum, and residence permits. Consequently,

migration authorities occupy an intermediate position between social policy, public administration, and the security sector (Hofmann et al., 2016; Malakhov & Simon, 2018).

In the original version of this article, the Federal Migration Service (FMS) of the Russian Federation was presented as a state institution that gradually shifted from a predominantly socio-administrative orientation to a control-oriented one. The authors associated this transformation with the centralization of state power and the increasing use of migration mechanisms to restrict the rights of foreign nationals. Although this research problem remains relevant, it requires both conceptual and methodological refinement.

First, the functions of migration authorities have never been exclusively social. In addition to providing assistance to refugees and internally displaced persons, they have traditionally included population registration, the regulation of migration flows, identity documentation, and supervision of compliance with migration regulations.

Second, the organizational autonomy of a public agency does not necessarily imply political independence or the predominance of service-oriented functions. Likewise, the incorporation of a migration authority into the structure of the Ministry of Internal Affairs does not, by itself, demonstrate a repressive institutional character. Such a conclusion requires empirical evidence of changes in institutional powers, administrative practices, target groups, and the mechanisms through which administrative coercion is exercised.

Third, the concept of a *totalitarian regime* cannot be employed merely as a political label. Its application requires clearly defined theoretical criteria, which were absent from the original version of the manuscript. Therefore, this study adopts the analytically more precise concept of the securitization of migration. This concept refers to the process by which migration and particular categories of migrants are increasingly framed as threats to public, national, demographic, or cultural security, thereby legitimizing enhanced surveillance, stricter controls, and the implementation of extraordinary or restrictive measures.

Contemporary studies of Russian migration policy demonstrate that it is shaped not only by labour market demands but also by domestic and foreign policy priorities. Previous research has also established a close relationship between Russian migration policy, administrative control practices, and national security discourse (Heusala, 2018; Hofmann et al., 2016; Malakhov & Simon, 2018).

The purpose of this study is to identify the main stages in the institutional transformation of migration governance in the Russian Federation between 1992 and 2026 and to assess changes in the balance among its administrative, service-related, control, and security functions.

To achieve this purpose, the study addresses the following research objectives:

- to clarify the theoretical concept of the securitization of migration;
- to systematize the regulatory changes affecting the institutional status of the Russian migration authorities;
- to identify the principal stages in the institutional transformation of the Federal Migration Service;
- to examine the consequences of transferring migration functions back to the Ministry of Internal Affairs in 2016;
- to analyse the use of citizenship and registration procedures as instruments of political control in the temporarily occupied territories of Ukraine.

The object of the study is the system of state migration governance in the Russian Federation.

The subject of the study is the institutional transformation of the status, subordination, functions, and political-security role of the Federal Migration Service and the units of the Ministry of Internal Affairs of the Russian Federation that assumed its powers following its abolition.

Literature Review

1. Migration Governance as an Object of Institutional Analysis

Migration governance encompasses the formal rules, public authorities, administrative procedures, and institutional practices through which the state regulates entry, exit, residence, employment, identity documentation, asylum, and citizenship (Hofmann et al., 2016; Malakhov & Simon, 2018).

The institutional approach makes it possible to examine not only the formally assigned powers of migration authorities but also:

- their position within the system of executive government;
- the nature of their interaction with law enforcement and security agencies;
- the balance between service-oriented and supervisory functions;
- the influence of political priorities on administrative decision-making;
- the practical consequences of applying formally neutral administrative procedures.

Research at both the federal and regional levels of migration policy in the Russian Federation has demonstrated that policy decisions in this field are often shaped more by political priorities than by economic conditions or objective labour market demands. Other studies have highlighted the combination of Soviet administrative traditions of population control, the interests of bureaucratic actors, and the ad hoc modification of migration regulations. This perspective suggests that migration policy should be understood not merely as a body of legal norms but also as an expression of the broader institutional logic of state bureaucracy (Heusala, 2018; Hofmann et al., 2016; Malakhov & Simon, 2018).

2. The Concept of the Securitization of Migration

The concept of securitization explains how a social phenomenon is transformed from an issue of ordinary political or administrative regulation into a matter of security. This transformation occurs when political actors frame a phenomenon as an existential threat to the state, public order, cultural identity, or society, thereby legitimizing extraordinary policy responses (Grigorieva, 2021; Mamedov et al., 2026).

In democratic political systems, the success of securitization largely depends on whether the relevant audience accepts the proposed security framing. In authoritarian regimes, however, the mechanism operates differently. State authorities can institutionalize a security-oriented approach through legislation, bureaucratic procedures, law enforcement practices, and a controlled information environment without obtaining broad public consent (Mamedov et al., 2026).

Institutional analyses of the Russian case demonstrate that migrants are increasingly categorized as security risks through official documentation, counterterrorism programmes, law enforcement practices, and the coordinated activities of both security agencies and civilian bureaucratic institutions (Grigorieva, 2021; Heusala, 2018).

Recent research on securitization under authoritarian conditions likewise indicates that migration in the Russian Federation is increasingly associated with terrorism, crime, cultural threats, and military-mobilization requirements. In this context, securitization is implemented simultaneously through political discourse, legislation, and administrative coercion (Mamedov et al., 2026).

Accordingly, this study defines the securitization of migration governance as an institutionally embedded shift in policy priorities from social protection, service provision, and the regulation of human mobility toward surveillance, identification, restriction, coercion, and the use of migration-related administrative procedures to pursue broader security and political objectives.

Materials and methods

This study is qualitative in nature and adopts a theoretical-analytical research design.

The empirical basis of the study consists of:

- regulatory and legal acts of the Russian Federation governing the establishment, reorganization, and abolition of the Federal Migration Service (FMS);
- official regulations defining the functions and responsibilities of the migration authorities;
- peer-reviewed scholarly publications on migration policy and the securitization of migration;
- reports of the United Nations concerning the human rights situation in the temporarily occupied territories of Ukraine;
- the original manuscript and the periodization proposed by its authors.

The following research methods were employed:

Historical-institutional analysis was used to reconstruct changes in the institutional status, subordination, and functions of the migration authorities.

Process tracing was applied to identify the sequence of key regulatory decisions adopted in 1992, 2004, 2012, and 2016.

Structural-functional analysis was employed to classify institutional powers into administrative-service, regulatory, supervisory, and security functions.

Comparative temporal analysis was used to compare the successive stages in the development of the Russian migration governance system.

Qualitative content analysis was conducted to identify key categories in legal acts and official reports, including *control*, *supervision*, *registration*, *citizenship*, *deportation*, *security*, and *the legal status of foreign nationals*.

The unit of analysis was an institutional decision that modified at least one of the following parameters:

- organizational status;
- institutional subordination;
- statutory competence;
- policy orientation;
- the scope of administrative coercive powers.

The study does not seek to establish the personal motives of Russian government officials or to verify claims regarding informal institutional competition between the Ministry of Internal Affairs and the Federal Security Service (FSB), as the available evidence is insufficient to establish such causal relationships with an adequate degree of scientific reliability.

Results

1. Stage One: Institutional Establishment of the Migration Service (1992–2001)

The Federal Migration Service (FMS) of Russia was established by Presidential Decree No. 626 of 14 June 1992 on the basis of the Committee for Population Migration under the Ministry of Labour and Employment. Subsequently, Government Resolution No. 740 of 22 September 1992 designated the FMS as a federal executive authority responsible for implementing state migration policy and coordinating the activities of other public authorities in this field (President of the Russian Federation, 1992; Government of the Russian Federation, 1992).

The establishment of the Service occurred in the context of large-scale population movements following the dissolution of the Soviet Union, armed conflicts across the post-Soviet space, the return of ethnic Russians and other former Soviet citizens from newly independent republics, and the need to develop a new system of citizenship administration and migration registration (Heusala, 2018).

During this period, social and humanitarian functions played a significant role, particularly in providing assistance to refugees, internally displaced persons, and other categories of forced migrants. Nevertheless, it would be inaccurate to characterize the Service as an exclusively social institution, as its statutory responsibilities also included coordinating state migration policy and

regulating migration processes from the outset.

Accordingly, the first stage can be characterized as a period of socio-administrative institutional formation, during which humanitarian responsibilities were combined with the establishment of a comprehensive system of state registration, migration administration, and regulatory control.

2. Stage Two: Police Integration and the Expansion of Supervisory Functions (2002–2011)

During the early 2000s, migration governance became increasingly integrated into the institutional framework of the Ministry of Internal Affairs of the Russian Federation. In 2004, Presidential Decree No. 928 established the organizational framework of the Federal Migration Service as an agency subordinated to the Ministry of Internal Affairs. The Service exercised law enforcement, supervisory, regulatory, and public service functions in the field of migration (President of the Russian Federation, 2004).

Its principal responsibilities included:

- issuing identity and migration documents;
- maintaining residence registration records;
- administering the migration registration of foreign nationals;
- supervising compliance with migration regulations;
- implementing citizenship legislation;
- carrying out deportation and administrative removal procedures;
- combating irregular migration.

The combination of service delivery and supervisory powers is characteristic of migration authorities in many countries. However, the subordination of the FMS to the Ministry of Internal Affairs strengthened its institutional connection with the law enforcement system and increasingly framed irregular migration as an issue of public order and national security (Grigorieva, 2021; Heusala, 2018).

At the same time, institutional subordination to the Ministry of Internal Affairs cannot by itself be regarded as evidence of the full securitization of migration governance. During this period, the FMS continued to provide a substantial range of public services, administer citizenship procedures, issue official documents, and regulate labour migration.

Thus, the second stage was characterized by the integration of administrative migration governance with police mechanisms of supervision and control.

3. Stage Three: Organizational Autonomization of the Federal Migration Service (2012–2016)

The original version of the manuscript incorrectly interpreted 2012 as the beginning of the abolition of the Federal Migration Service. In reality, in May 2012 the Service was removed from the jurisdiction of the Ministry of Internal Affairs and placed directly under the Government of the Russian Federation. Government Resolution No. 711 of 13 July 2012 approved a new Regulation on the Federal Migration Service, establishing an extensive central administrative structure and defining the FMS as a federal executive authority responsible for migration governance (Government of the Russian Federation, 2012).

Accordingly, the period from 2012 to 2016 should be interpreted as one of organizational autonomization rather than institutional dissolution.

Organizational autonomy did not diminish the Service's supervisory functions. During this period, the FMS simultaneously:

- provided public services;
- implemented state citizenship policy;
- administered migration registration;
- supervised the residence of foreign nationals;
- participated in combating irregular migration;

- cooperated closely with law enforcement agencies.

Therefore, the organizational autonomy achieved between 2012 and 2016 did not represent a return to a predominantly social model of migration governance. Instead, it reinforced the multifunctional nature of the Service, within which service delivery coexisted with supervision, documentation, and the enforcement of migration legislation.

4. Stage Four: Abolition of the Federal Migration Service and the Return of Migration Functions to the Ministry of Internal Affairs after 2016

By Presidential Decree No. 156 of 5 April 2016, the Federal Migration Service was abolished, and its functions and powers were transferred to the Ministry of Internal Affairs of the Russian Federation (President of the Russian Federation, 2016).

Within the Ministry, these responsibilities were concentrated in the Main Directorate for Migration Affairs and its territorial divisions. This institutional reform:

- abolished the Federal Migration Service as an independent federal authority;
- returned migration governance to the direct administrative hierarchy of the Ministry of Internal Affairs;
- institutionally integrated migration registration, identity documentation, and citizenship administration more closely with police oversight;
- expanded opportunities for interagency information exchange and the application of administrative coercive measures.

However, the legal act abolishing the Federal Migration Service (FMS) does not, by itself, provide sufficient evidence that the reform resulted from institutional rivalry between the Federal Security Service (FSB) and the Ministry of Internal Affairs (MIA). Such an interpretation should therefore be regarded as a hypothesis requiring additional documentary, personnel, and budgetary evidence.

A more evidence-based conclusion is that the 2016 reform reflected the broader trend toward the centralization of executive authority and the strengthening of the law enforcement dimension of migration governance (Heusala, 2018).

5. Citizenship and Passportization as Instruments of Political Control

The institutional transformation of migration governance acquired particular significance in connection with the application of Russian citizenship legislation in the temporarily occupied territories of Ukraine.

Two analytical levels should be distinguished.

The first is the formal legal level. The issuance of passports, residence registration, and the administration of citizenship constitute standard functions of migration authorities.

The second is the political-contextual level. When these procedures are implemented by occupying power and become prerequisites for access to employment, healthcare, social welfare, education, or freedom of movement, they cease to function as politically neutral administrative services.

According to the Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights (OHCHR), Russian occupation authorities introduced Russian administrative and legal systems, including citizenship procedures, in the occupied territories of Ukraine while exerting pressure on residents to obtain Russian passports. Individuals who declined Russian citizenship experienced increasing restrictions on freedom of movement and progressively limited access to public-sector employment, healthcare, and social benefits. These findings are based on more than 2,300 interviews with victims and witnesses (Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights, 2024).

OHCHR reports covering the period from 24 February 2022 to 31 December 2025 further document widespread and systematic discriminatory measures that deprived many residents of the occupied territories of genuine freedom of choice regarding residence and return. Among these measures were requirements to obtain Russian citizenship and comply with the legal regime

imposed by the occupation authorities (Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights, 2025, 2026).

Accordingly, the institutional infrastructure of citizenship administration and migration registration performs at least four interrelated functions:

- identification, through the creation of official registers and the determination of individuals' legal status;
- distribution, by regulating access to public services and social benefits;
- disciplinary control, through the granting or restriction of rights in order to influence individual behaviour;
- political integration, by incorporating the population of occupied territories into the legal and administrative framework of the occupying state.

Within this context, citizenship evolves from a legal bond between an individual and the state into an instrument of territorial consolidation and political integration (Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights, 2024, 2025, 2026).

Discussion

The findings of this study do not support the simplified interpretation that the Federal Migration Service (FMS) was initially an exclusively social institution and subsequently transformed abruptly into an instrument of political repression.

Instead, the analysis reveals a considerably more complex trajectory of institutional development.

First, social, regulatory, and supervisory functions were embedded in the activities of the migration authorities from the time of their establishment. What changed over time was not the existence of control itself but rather its institutional significance, operational forms, and political context (Hofmann et al., 2016; Malakhov & Simon, 2018).

Second, the institutional status of the Federal Migration Service evolved in a non-linear manner. The Service initially operated as an independent federal authority, was subsequently integrated into the Ministry of Internal Affairs, became directly subordinated to the Government of the Russian Federation in 2012, and was finally abolished in 2016, when its functions were transferred back to the Ministry of Internal Affairs (President of the Russian Federation, 1992, 2004, 2016; Government of the Russian Federation, 2012).

Third, the organizational autonomization of the Service in 2012 did not imply a reduction in control functions, just as the 2016 reintegration did not create such functions from scratch. Rather, the significance of the 2016 reform lay in altering the institutional environment within which these functions were exercised, as migration governance became directly embedded within the police hierarchy.

Fourth, in the Russian case, the securitization of migration extends beyond political rhetoric portraying migration as a security threat. Instead, it has become institutionalized through several interconnected mechanisms: (Grigorieva, 2021; Heusala, 2018; Mamedov et al., 2026).

- residence registration systems;
- administrative supervision;
- control over access to rights and public services;
- the expansion of law enforcement involvement in migration governance;
- the categorization of specific groups of migrants as potential security risks.

These findings are consistent with previous studies demonstrating the significant role of bureaucratic institutions in constructing migrants as objects of counterterrorism and national security governance (Grigorieva, 2021; Heusala, 2018; Mamedov et al., 2026).

Furthermore, the implementation of Russian citizenship and residence registration procedures in the temporarily occupied territories of Ukraine illustrates how migration and citizenship policies can

be incorporated into a broader system of political control. From a methodological perspective, however, it is important not to attribute all documented violations directly to the Main Directorate for Migration Affairs of the Ministry of Internal Affairs without identifying the specific institutional competences and implementing authorities involved. Rather, these practices should be understood as components of a broader policy pursued by Russian state institutions and occupation authorities, within which migration administration constitutes only one element (Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights, 2024, 2025, 2026).

Accordingly, the interpretation proposed in this study differs from the initial assumption that the Federal Migration Service simply became an instrument of a totalitarian regime. A more analytically accurate conclusion is that the Russian migration governance system underwent a gradual process of securitization, manifested through the strengthening of supervisory functions, the reintegration of migration administration into the police system, and the increasing use of administrative procedures to pursue broader political and security objectives (Grigorieva, 2021; Mamedov et al., 2026).

Limitations

This study has several limitations.

First, it relies primarily on legal and regulatory documents, academic publications, and reports produced by international organizations. Consequently, the functions formally prescribed by legislation may not fully correspond to actual administrative practices.

Second, the lack of access to internal governmental and ministerial documentation makes it impossible to determine the informal motivations underlying the reorganization of the Federal Migration Service or to assess the influence of particular security agencies on the decision-making process.

Third, the available evidence concerning the temporarily occupied territories of Ukraine reflects the activities of multiple Russian state institutions and occupation authorities. Therefore, attributing specific violations to individual migration authorities requires further empirical investigation.

Fourth, this study does not include a quantitative analysis of administrative decisions concerning citizenship, deportation, entry bans, or migration-related administrative offences. Incorporating such data would strengthen the empirical validation of the study's conclusions and provide a more comprehensive assessment of institutional change.

Conclusions

The development of migration governance in the Russian Federation between 1992 and 2026 followed a non-linear trajectory, characterized by successive transitions between the independent status of the Federal Migration Service, its subordination to the Ministry of Internal Affairs, a period of organizational autonomy under the Government of the Russian Federation, and the eventual reintegration of migration functions into the police hierarchy.

From its establishment, the Federal Migration Service combined socio-administrative, service-oriented, regulatory, and supervisory functions. Consequently, its institutional evolution cannot be reduced to a simple transition from a "humanitarian" agency to a "repressive" one.

During the 2000s, migration increasingly came to be interpreted through a security lens, whereby migration control became progressively associated with the maintenance of public order, the prevention of irregular migration, and efforts to counter extremism and terrorism (Grigorieva, 2021; Heusala, 2018; Mamedov et al., 2026).

The withdrawal of the Federal Migration Service from the jurisdiction of the Ministry of Internal Affairs in 2012 represented a process of organizational autonomization rather than the beginning of its dissolution. The Service was formally abolished in April 2016, after which its

functions were transferred to the Ministry of Internal Affairs of the Russian Federation (Government of the Russian Federation, 2012; President of the Russian Federation, 2016).

The 2016 reform institutionally integrated migration administration more closely with police oversight. At the same time, the available evidence does not provide sufficient grounds to conclude that the abolition of the Federal Migration Service was the proven outcome of an informal power struggle between the Ministry of Internal Affairs and the Federal Security Service.

The application of Russian citizenship and residence registration procedures in the temporarily occupied territories of Ukraine demonstrates how administrative instruments can be transformed into mechanisms of political integration, population control, and restrictions on access to fundamental rights and public services (Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights, 2024, 2025, 2026).

The principal trend identified in this study is not merely the centralization of the organizational structure but the securitization of migration governance, manifested in the gradual predominance of surveillance, identification, restrictive, and security-oriented functions over the principles of social protection and service-oriented administration.

Future research should focus on a comparative analysis of the practices employed by the territorial migration units of the Ministry of Internal Affairs of the Russian Federation, quantitative assessments of administrative decisions concerning foreign nationals, and a more comprehensive examination of the role of migration authorities in implementing the passportization policy in the temporarily occupied territories of Ukraine.

Funding

This study received no specific financial support.

Competing interests

The authors declare that they have no competing interests.

Use of Artificial Intelligence

Artificial intelligence was used for language editing, translation, and technical verification of the manuscript.

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