CHAPTER SEVEN
THE CONSULAR SERVICE IN RUSSIA:
PAST PROBLEMS, NEW CHALLENGES

Tatiana Zonova

Introduction

Russian diplomacy celebrated its consular service’s bicentenary in 2009. The past experiences of the Russian Empire and the Soviet Union—both positive and negative—provide a specific character for the Russian Federation’s present-day consular service. This chapter’s initial paragraphs describe the historical stages of the consular service’s formation. The chapter also examines the problems of democratic transition with regard to strengthening humanitarian aspects and human rights protection, greater openness and transparency. It then explains how the Russian consular service reacts to globalization trends, which condition the reinforcing of economic components of Russian external policy and the growing influx of Russian businessmen and tourists abroad. Globalization also increases migration flows, particularly within the Community of Independent States (CIS), and exacerbates security issues. Finally, the chapter reviews the application of advanced technology to consular services as another challenge for Russian diplomacy, as it requires higher qualification skills for consular staff and expensive office equipment.

History of the Russian Consular Service

The Birth of Regular Consular Representation

Information about the first Russian consulates dates back to Peter the Great, when the modern model of diplomacy was being introduced in Russia. So the emergence of the Russian consular system does not pre-date modern diplomacy by several centuries, as was the case in Western Europe.¹ Compared to the first Western consuls, who were

mainly promoting private merchants’ trade, Russian consulates were
primarily established for the state’s strategic and commercial purposes,
for both exports and imports. From the very beginning, consuls were
incorporated into a national foreign service.

Peter the Great first established consulates in countries where Rus-
sia’s presence in towns and seaports was imperative to explore the art
of building a navy (such as Amsterdam in 1707 and Venice in 1711)
or defending important dynastic, trade and seafaring interests (Paris in
1715, Vienna in 1718, Cadiz in 1723, Bordeaux in 1723 and Breslau in
1723). At the same time, Russia’s first consulates were established
in the East (China in 1719 and Persia in 1720). No wonder that at
the very same time Russian consulates performed diverse diplomatic
functions as well, particularly where there were not regular diplomatic
missions. Archives have abundant evidence of this, such as instruc-
tions that attach particular importance to the diplomatic activity of
Russia’s consul-general in Egypt. Consuls could hence also play the
role of diplomats.

From 1718 onwards, a special board named Kommerz Kollegium,
which also administered consular affairs, had mainly directed the Rus-
sian state’s home and foreign commerce. There were Russian auditors
in Danzig and Braunschweig, and special commissars in the Duch-
ies of Kurland and Semigallia. A consul-general appeared later in the
Grand Duchy of Tuscany. By the end of the eighteenth century there
were 34 Russian consulates abroad. In 1779 Russia’s Empress Cath-
erine the Great approved a writ of ministerial staff employed abroad.
Both the Kommerz Kollegium and the foreign affairs kollegium gave
instructions to Russian consuls. Although on the staff of foreign affairs
kollegium, Russian consuls were not considered diplomats.

For decades, Russian consuls had been supposed to follow individ-
ual instructions that they were to receive at the moment of assignment.
In 1820 the first Russian Consular Charter approved specified general

---

2 Vladimir Ulyanitsky, Russkie consulstva za granizeju v XVIII veke [Russian Con-
sulates Abroad in the Eighteenth Century] (Moscow: Tip. G. Lissner and A. Geshel,
1899); Vladimir Pervenzev, Konsulskaia sluzhba v Rossi (XVIII–XIX vv) [Consular
Service in Russia in the Eighteenth and Nineteenth Centuries] (Moscow: MGU, can-

3 Svetlana Turilova, ‘Rukovodstvo vneshney politikoy Rossi’ [Foreign Policy Man-
agement in Russia], in Istoriy Vneshney Politiki Rossii XVIII vek (Moscow: Mezhdun-

4 Archivy Vneshney Politiki Rossijskoj Imperii GA IV–2, op. 119, l. 139 [Saint Peters-
burg State Archive IV, folder 2, list 119, p. 139].