

Project Passport

Project Name/Title:	Children of Saint Petersburg
Project Location:	Saint Petersburg, Russia
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Project Duration:	8 years

Organizational Profile

The *Children of St. Petersburg* nongovernmental organization was first registered on April 2012 by Ekaterina Alimova and Julia Alimova, who are now the director and the coordinator of the organization respectively. The project operates in the city of Saint Petersburg, which is a popular destination among labor migrant families. The main aim of *Children of St. Petersburg* is the adaptation of migrant and refugee children by means of education. The majority of the teachers of the organization work on a voluntary basis, approximately a half of them has a degree in Pedagogy or some relevant experience.

The most popular discipline taught by the volunteers is Russian language, as its knowledge is crucial for migrants to stay in the country. By 2020 more than 180 children attend classes provided by the organization at the same time. During the COVID-19 pandemic *Children of St. Petersburg* continues to operate.

Project Description

a. Problem Statement

Lots of families from Central Asia migrate to developed Russian cities in order to give a better life to their children. However, the latter often cannot adjust to the life in a new country, as they do not receive proper education at school. Left without any support from the government or the society, they are also unattended by their parents who should spend a whole day at work. Thus, it is hard for children to establish any social contact.

There are three main problems that migrant and refugee children face when they come to Russia. The first one is school admission: some kids cannot attend classes due to bureaucratic, e.g. lack of registration, or personal reasons. The latter ones include such cases when an adolescent has to work instead of going to school in order to help their family financially, or do all household chores, which is especially true for girls. The second obstacle lies in education process as there are no special public schools for immigrants from Central Asia in St. Petersburg or elsewhere in Russia. In an ordinary school, where all subjects are taught in Russian, such children cannot keep up with other pupils of their age and should often study among kids 2-4 years younger. The last but not least problem is the children's inability to integrate into local Russian-speaking community. Poor knowledge of language and culture may lead to discrimination at school and even add to xenophobic feelings experienced by some members of the society. If the three difficulties mentioned above are left without any public support (state support is often insufficient or unavailable), kids eventually return to their home country to seek proper education and are therefore separated from their parents.

b. Rationale

Children of St. Petersburg is the first and to this day the only one organization in the city which works with kids from migrant and refugee families. The project is very important as it serves the problem of immigrants' adaptation and helps children to have a full life in Russia and become a part of Russian society in future. Volunteers at *Children of St. Petersburg* teach Russian language to immigrant kids and build up a strong community among them. At the beginning of children's path in a new city this community can prevent them from being socially excluded. It substitutes for the one at school and becomes a safe space where children can express themselves freely and support each other as they have much in common, from belonging to the same social group to speaking the same language. At the same time, children are not isolated in this Tajik, Uzbek or Azeri only community as they study in multi-national groups with a Russian teacher, share their cultural experience and learn to be open-minded. Kids are encouraged to speak only Russian language during the lessons so that everybody could understand each other.

c. Project Goal and Objectives

The motto of the organization is that every child has a right to have a future: to get education, to have ambitions and to make them come true. The short-term objectives the project follows to implement its mission include:

- To provide migrant kids with free access to the courses of Russian language and other disciplines;
- To prepare children for school, college and university entrance examination;
- To hold in-city camps for children each season during the school holidays;
- To introduce children to Russian culture by attending museums, theaters and festivals 1-2 times per month;
- To consult parents on formal bureaucratic issues and help them with their children's admission to school;
- To support *Children of St. Petersburg* students' families during the COVID-19 pandemic, e.g. raise money and provide food commodities.

The long-term goals of *Children of St. Petersburg* are:

- To give migrant and refugee children the same opportunities for education and development as Russian children;

- To make Russian society more tolerant and diminish xenophobic feelings among Russian people.

d. Project Activities

The main project activity is language courses. Children are divided into small groups according to their age and level of Russian language. If there is no suitable group for a particular kid, then a volunteer studies with him or her individually. The lessons for each group take place 1-2 times a week and last for 1-1,5 hour, depending on the age of the students. Classes are very interactive and include various types of activities such as reading books, writing from dictation, revising grammar rules, playing different games in Russian language, singing songs and watching cartoons.

Besides regular classes, children are acquainted with the culture of Saint Petersburg and Russia. The cultural programme includes visits to theaters and museums and city excursions, which are also conducted by volunteers. At holiday camps, up to 40 kids meet together to practice their Russian and participate in different workshops. For instance, *Children of St. Petersburg* has cooperated with *Upsala Circus*, and migrant kids performed circus stunts together with hooligans.

e. Project Sustainability

Since the foundation of *Children of St. Petersburg* in 2012, the number of its locations in Saint Petersburg has expanded from 3 up to 15. The majority of lessons are held in libraries, while volunteer meetings usually take place in open spaces. The organization has also made a youth center for elder teenagers where they prepare for the Unified State Exam and attend educational events addressing many controversial issues. The two last offline events before the COVID-19 pandemic were dedicated to gender stereotypes and held on 23 February and 8 March, Men and Women Days in Russia respectively. After the beginning of quarantine, all of the 15 locations continued teaching kids and helping them at school if it was needed.

The number of students is constantly growing, and by the Spring 2020 there were more than 180 kids studying at the organization. Children who have finished Russian language courses successfully continue to take part in city camps and start to learn new disciplines with *Children of St. Petersburg*. The range of courses includes a lot of subjects besides Russian language, such as Math, Physics, History, English and French languages etc. All the initiatives in establishing new classes are taken by volunteers themselves.

Since December 2016, the educational activity of the project also includes publishing *Gul* newspaper. It is made by young women who have migrated from Central Asia and is devoted to

the defense of women's rights. The newspaper is published in four languages and distributed in Saint Petersburg for free.

Sphere Research

Besides *Children of St. Petersburg*, there is only one organization working with migrants and refugees. It is called *Civic Assistance Committee* and operates in Moscow and Moscow region. This NGO was set up in 1990 and provided legal assistance for people without citizenship. *Civic Assistance Committee* had been dealing with migrant children from 2000-s, but its Children's center was registered officially only in 2014. The work of this project is similar to the activity of *Children of St. Petersburg* and it is oriented to the adaptation of migrant kids to a new life in Russia. The Moscow organization is smaller than the one in St. Petersburg as only 50 students attend children's classes in *Civic Assistance Committee* each year. Volunteers work with the kids on an equal basis with professional teachers there.

