



By: TA | AP Insight

# Immigrants from Asia find hostility and violence in Russia



The immigrant worker from Uzbekistan entered the bank in Moscow, but when he reached the teller, she refused to serve him and she wouldn't say why.

For him and others from impoverished countries across Central Asia who seek better lives in Russia, such hostility is woven into everyday life. Sometimes it bursts into outright violence.

"Mostly you notice it when you go to the hospital, a clinic, a government office: You stand in line and everyone shoots you dirty looks," said the man, who spoke to The Associated Press on condition of anonymity because he feared repercussions.

Such xenophobia clashes with economic realities at a time when Russia has a labor shortage, primarily due to its war in Ukraine.

In the first quarter of 2025, over 20% of Russian businesses said they were hindered by a lack of workers, according to the Central Bank.

But rather than welcoming laborers, Russian officials are fomenting anti-migrant sentiment and increasing restrictions on immigrants, which the government says number 6.1 million, but is probably higher. The government is tracking their movement, clamping down on their employment and impeding their children's rights to education.

## A massacre and a backlash

The continued crackdown comes as a trial began this month for four Tajik nationals who are accused of the shooting and arson **attack** at a Moscow concert hall in March 2024 that killed 149 people.

The four were arrested within hours of the attack and **appeared** in court with signs of being severely beaten. An Islamic State group claimed responsibility but Russia sought to blame Ukraine for the bloodshed.

Anti-migrant rhetoric had been growing in

Russia since the early 2020s. But the massacre in particular launched a wave of "terrible violence" against immigrants, said lawyer Valentina Chupik, who has worked with the immigrant community for over 20 years. In the eight days after the killings, she received 700 reports of injuries to immigrants, including "faces smashed against the doors of police stations," she said.

## Central Asian migrants face ethnic profiling, arbitrary arrests, and other harassment by police in Russia - Human Rights Watch

Parliament speaker Vyacheslav Volodin captured the public mood after the massacre, saying "migration control is extremely important" to ensure foreign nationals carrying out "illegal activity" could be deported without a court order.

The violence drew concern from human rights groups.

"Central Asian migrants seeking work in Russia due to dire economic conditions in their countries of origin today face ethnic profiling, arbitrary arrests, and other harassment by police in Russia," Human Rights Watch said in a report on the anniversary of the attack.

"The heinous massacre cannot justify massive rights abuses against Central Asian migrants in Russia," said its author, Syinat Sultanalieva.

## Raids, roundups and restrictions

While some violence has subsided, it hasn't disappeared. In April, police raided a Kyrgyz-run bathhouse in Moscow with video showing masked men forcing half-naked bathers to crawl across the floor and deliberately stepping on them before covering the lens of a security camera.

Police also reportedly rounded up immigrants in raids on warehouses, construction sites and

mosques, then coerced them into joining the military to fight in Ukraine.

Some are threatened with having their residency documents withheld, while others are recently naturalized citizens who failed to register for military service.

In such cases, serving in the military is **presented** as the only alternative to prison or deportation. For others, a fast track to Russian citizenship is offered as an incentive for enlisting.

Speaking in St. Petersburg in May, Alexander Bastrykin, head of Russia's Investigative Committee, said "20,000 'young' citizens of Russia, who for some reason do not like living in Uzbekistan, Tajikistan (and) Kyrgyzstan" were serving in Ukraine.

Those immigrants who have avoided violence still are subject to new anti-migrant laws. Much of this is targeted specifically toward workers from Central Asia.

### **In 2024, 13 Russian regions banned immigrants from certain jobs, including in hospitality, catering and finance**

In 2024, 13 Russian regions banned immigrants from certain jobs, including in hospitality, catering and finance, and even as taxi drivers.

A pilot program starting in September in the Moscow region requires migrants who enter Russia without a visa to be tracked via an app. Those failing to comply are added to a police watchlist, impeding access to services like banking, and subjecting them to a possible cutoff of cellphone and internet connectivity.

A nationwide law banned children of immigrants from attending school unless they could prove they could speak Russian.

Less than six weeks after the law came into force, officials told local media that only 19% of children who applied for the language test were able to take it, and the most common

reason for rejection was incomplete or inaccurate documents.

Another man from Uzbekistan who has worked in Russia for almost two decades and lives in St. Petersburg said he's had to wait in line for over seven hours to get needed residency documents. The man, who also spoke to AP on condition of anonymity for fear of reprisals, hopes to stay in Russia but says the climate has worsened.

"It's hard to get paperwork," he said. "There just isn't the time."

The oppressive laws sometimes force immigrants to resort to paying bribes. Chupik, the lawyer, believes that Russia's system results in "violations that cannot be avoided."

"This is exactly what this mass regulation is striving for: not for all migrants to be here legally, but for everyone to be illegal," she said. "That way, they can extract bribes from anyone at any moment and deport anyone who resists."

## **Encouraging anti-migrant sentiment**

Anti-migrant sentiment is unlikely to diminish anytime soon, mostly because it's encouraged by authorities like the Investigative Committee's Bastrykin, who said immigrants "physically occupy our territory, not just with their ideology but with specific buildings" — referring to sites such as mosques.

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Migrants are an easy scapegoat for many social ills, and not just in Russia, said Caress Schenk, an associate professor of political science at Nazarbayev University in Kazakhstan.

“Closing borders, conducting migrant raids and tightening policies are all tools that are easy go-tos for politicians the world over,” she said. “It goes in cycles that are sensitive to geopolitical pressures, as we’re seeing now, but also things like election campaigns and domestic political rivalries.”

A surge of “anti-migrant propaganda” has dwarfed previous rhetoric of recent years, according to the Moscow-based Uzbek immigrant who was ignored by the bank teller.

“If every person paying attention to the TV, the radio, the internet is only told that migrants are ‘bad, bad, bad,’ if they only show bad places and bad people, of course, that’s what people are going to think,” he said.

Such anti-migrant rhetoric has become part of the nationalist narrative from President Vladimir Putin and others used to justify the 2022 invasion of Ukraine — that Russia is under constant threat.

“Russia has started lumping together all of ‘the external enemies’ that it’s created over the years for itself: the migrants, the Ukrainians, the West,” said Tajik journalist Sher Khashimov, who focuses on migration, identity and social issues. “It all becomes this part of this single narrative of Russia being this castle

under siege, and Putin being the only person who is on the lookout for ordinary Russians.”

The Uzbek immigrant in Moscow said Russia has created conditions “supposedly to help people, to help migrants.”

“But the rules do not work,” he added. “Special barriers are created that migrants cannot pass through on their own.”