

Illegal Migration Declines, But Problems Persist

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Illegal migration has declined slightly in Moscow amid reinforced control by authorities and harsher penalties, but unregistered migrants are still immeasurable and their adaptation and professional level remain low, officials and experts said Monday.

"Cooperation of the entire law enforcement community has improved significantly," Olga Kirillova, head of the Moscow branch of the Federal Migration Service, told a news conference.

"We've noted that the number of registered migrants is growing, while the number of violators is decreasing," Kirillova said.

Fines for migration violations are set to rise in August, and in the near future, mandatory deportation will replace fines as punishment for migrants who violate migration laws, Ivanov and Kirillova said.

Moscow migration officials detected and resolved almost 89,000 administrative violations of migration laws in the first six months of the year, compared to almost 78,000 in the same period last year.

Almost 15,000 foreigners were temporarily banned from Russia for legal violations related to migration and other laws, showing a 188 percent increase compared to all of last year, when nearly 5,200 were banned from the country, Monday's press release said.

In addition, more than 8,000 employers were fined for hiring migrants illegally, compared to some 7,400 in the same period last year.

The increase in detected violations came as a result of more raids involving more officials, as well as the fact that larger facilities were checked, like train stations instead of apartments, Kirillova told journalists in response to a question from The Moscow Times.

However, Kirillova said there was only "slight progress toward improvement" in fighting illegal migration.

"No one knows where and how the main bulk live, or how they provide for themselves," Kirillova said.

More than 835,000 migrants were put into the registry this year, including labor migrants, students and tourists, according to Monday's press release.

Of all migrants on the registry, about 218,000 were laborers, and their number has gone down, Vladimir Ivanov, Kirillova's deputy, told journalists, attributing the trend to unspecified restrictions introduced by City Hall.

Mukhammad Amin Madzhumder, head of the Russian Migrants Federation, said by telephone that of Moscow's 3 million labor migrants, more than 2.7 million are working illegally.

Vladimir Mukomel, chief migration expert at the Institute of Sociology of the Russian Academy of Sciences, suggested that 1 million to 1.5 million migrants are illegally employed in Moscow and the Moscow region alone.

At that, only some 400 migrants have passed a test on the Russian language and culture, Kirillova said.

"Knowledge of the language [among migrants] is not improving, and their professional skills leave much to be desired," she said.

Madzhumder and Mukomel agreed that migrants would not take language and culture lessons or become integrated into society until authorities create favorable conditions for their legal employment, such as raising quotas for work permits and decreasing taxes for employers.

Mukomel said the quota of 200,000 work permits was "artificially lowered" by authorities in order to show that they "were protecting the domestic labor market." In his opinion, more work permits should be issued and businesses should be allowed to apply for permits with shorter notice than 18 months in advance, as it currently is.

"The more we toughen up laws and reduce quotas, the more we push migrants into the shadow sector or the criminal sector of the economy and to segregation," he said.

Those migrants who are not lucky enough to get a work permit to get hired by a company or a private entrepreneur can obtain a permit to be employed by a private individual, but such jobs are few and far between, and migrants often end up working for a business illegally, Mukomel said.

Even migrants who do get work permits are often employed illegally because their employers want to avoid taxes, Madzhumder said. In such cases, employers need migrants to have the work permits just to show them to migration officials in case of an unexpected raid, he said.

And even when migrants are employed legally, they may face poor treatment by their employers. There are reports, for instance, of workers who are legally employed being bribed by employers who hire them on the condition that they provide a kickback from their monthly salary.

Madzhumder proposed a temporary "amnesty" for all migrants that would grant them work permits and oblige them to introduce their basic personal data into a single database, which would make it "easy to control them," he said.

"Authorities will then have the right to pose demands: If you want to work, study the Russian language and culture," he said.

Currently, however, with an average 60 hours of work per week, illegal migrants have no time for language lessons, Mukomel said.

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