

# Business Ombudsman Proposes Amnesty for Migrants

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Businessman Boris Titov at a news conference in May. **Sergei Porter**

Amid rising anti-migrant sentiment and calls to introduce strict rules for migrants from Central Asian countries, business ombudsman Boris Titov has come up with an unexpected proposal: granting illegal migrant workers an amnesty.

"Instead of trying to look at the problem calmly and in a professional way, politicians are led by their philistine fears of migrant workers. But if their dreams to clear Russia of migrants come true, the country's economy would collapse," he said in an Echo Moskvy radio blog Tuesday.

Granting illegal migrants who are already in Russia with legal status would boost Russia's economy, he said.

In such a situation, the state must guarantee "the maximum liberalization" of the process

for getting a work permit instead of introducing barriers for migrant workers, he said, adding that 15.88 million migrants came to Russia last year and only 1.34 million of them received work permits.

Titov's idea has already been met with criticism, however, with Konstantin Romodanovsky, head of the Federal Migration Service, on Tuesday saying such a plan would never come to fruition as long as he is in charge.

"There definitely will not be an amnesty for people who are loitering around our streets and violating our rules. Moreover, in accordance with new legislation, we bar them from coming to Russia," he told Interfax, adding that 215,000 foreign citizens who violated immigration laws were not allowed to enter Russia in 2013.

The public reaction to Titov's proposal will likely be just as skeptical, as immigration has become one of the most politically charged issues in the country in recent months. Recent polls have shown a highly negative attitude of Russians toward migrants from former Soviet republics, and many politicians have called for a tighter visa regime with countries that currently enjoy a visa-free regime.

Starting from 2015, citizens of former Soviet Republics are supposed to be allowed to enter Russia only by using their international passports. The initiative was first announced by Romodanovsky, and it was approved by Putin in April.

Titov said such a measure would not help solve the problem, however, and would instead make the situation even worse. "I would propose an immigration amnesty, which would involve legalizing all illegal migrants," he said.

In an interview with *Rossia 24* on Wednesday, Titov seemed to tone down his position, however, saying not everyone would qualify for the amnesty, only those with an official contract and whose employer would agree to guarantee social insurance.

Additionally, he said migrants or their employers would have to keep money on deposit to ensure deportation if the migrant were to violate laws.

But if Titov's plan would ultimately help the economy, it would do little to help the migrants themselves, according to Tatiana Lokshina, deputy director of Human Rights Watch's Moscow office.

Lokshina said the suggestion was rather one-sided, as it wouldn't solve the legal problems migrants face when coming to Russia, since their employers usually prefer that they work illegally to avoid paying taxes.

"The amnesty will not help to create measures that would stop employers from using migrant workers as freely as they do now," she said by phone.

In February, Human Rights Watch released a report based on interviews with 66 migrant workers who were or had been previously employed at construction sites for the upcoming Winter Olympics. The report said that there was widespread "abuse and exploitation" of migrant workers in Sochi, with employers often not paying wages, confiscating passports and keeping migrants in miserable conditions.

Many migrant workers who come to Russia end up working at construction sites.

When asked to comment on the situation and whether Titov's proposal would impact the construction industry, a representative of Ant Yapi, a Turkish construction company doing large-scale projects in Russia, said she was not able to comment on the matter as she did not know anything about the idea.

Human rights ombudsman Vladimir Lukin and several other human rights activists, including head of Moscow Helsinki Group Lyudmila Alexeyeva, supported Titov's idea, while the majority of lawmakers said the idea would never be approved by the State Duma.

"There is no chance that the State Duma would approve such an initiative, since all parties support the idea of introducing strict measures to control illegal immigration," said Oleg Smolin, a Duma deputy from the Communist Party.

Irina Yarovaya, a member of the ruling United Russia party, told reporters Tuesday that Titov's idea was an "alarming signal both to business and future migrants, as it gives them the notion that Russian laws can be violated."

Despite some lawmakers' comments, though, Titov's proposal may not be as unrealistic as it sounds, as another amnesty plan he spearheaded has already been applied to nearly 800 people.

The Prosecutor General's Office announced Wednesday that more than 780 people earlier convicted or accused of fraud or embezzlement had been freed as part of the economic amnesty that took effect in July.

Vladimir Slatinov, a political expert with the Institute for Humanitarian and Political Research, said Titov's newest idea was driven by potential economic benefits for employers, similar to the economic amnesty plan, which sought to help the economy.

"The initiative would be very beneficial for entrepreneurs, especially in the conditions of imminent economic stagnation predicted by the Economic Development Ministry," Slatinov said by phone.

But authorities would probably not approve the idea, Slatinov said, because it is a "sensitive issue in society," and supporting such an idea might prompt people to support the country's nationalist parties and movements.

Dmitry Dyomushkin, head of the nationalist movement Russkie, had a counterproposal for Titov's suggestion. Dyomushkin told Interfax on Wednesday that a 5-year ban for migrant workers should be introduced instead of an amnesty.

According to the Federal Migration Service, more than 10 million migrants currently work in Russia, most of them natives of Uzbekistan, Tadjikistan, Kyrgyzstan, Ukraine and Moldova.

In a poll conducted last month by employment website [Superjob.ru](http://Superjob.ru), 6 percent of those surveyed said they thought migrant workers represented a boon for the Russian economy. According to the same poll, however, 52 percent said they thought immigrants contributed to an increase in crime and corruption.

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