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WATCH

Living In Fear and Humiliation

Rising Xenophobic Harassment and Violence
towards Central Asian Migrants in Russia



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Summary

Back home we don't have any hopes for a good life, it's a total economic catastrophe there, complete lack of employment opportunities. The need to earn money, for a better living, forces us to go to Russia, but here there is no protection for us—we're like hostages between two fires. In Russia we're persecuted, humiliated, extorted. Going back home is impossible because of the economic crisis and poverty. No country accepts us, and we're destined to suffer in inhumane conditions with no hope and no rights.

—Daler Kurbanov, age 34, online interview, November 7, 2024

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. They also face wider xenophobia and violence, often perpetrated by far-right Russian nationalist groups.

The experience of Daler Kurbanov is illustrative. In the 10 years since he left Tajikistan to work in Russia, Daler says the level of xenophobic violence and administrative harassment that Central Asian migrants experience has grown significantly, especially he feels for those from Tajikistan:

Life of migrants today here is mired in constant fear and humiliation to put it mildly. Every day we face discrimination, cruelty on the part of law enforcement. The police start creating problems when they see an Asian-looking person, especially a Tajik. Even if your documents are alright, you have everything, including the patent [temporary work permit], it does not matter to them.... What matters is that you're Asian.

According to Daler, when Russian police officers stop migrants from Central Asia for an arbitrary check, they demand bribes. If the migrants have no money, the police take them to the nearest precinct and lock them up in dark holding cells with up to 20 people squeezed in. The detention conditions are horrible, Daler said, with not enough space, sanitation, and ventilation, or any possibility to maintain hygiene.

Mistreatment goes hand in hand with poor conditions. “The detainees are forced to stand for hours,” Daler said. Inhumane treatment like this continues, he said, until detainees are either able to pay their way out, or since 2022, agree to sign a military contract with Russia’s Defense Ministry and get sent to fight the war with Ukraine.

Daler concluded: “We feel in constant fear and danger. It’s as if we are not humans, but criminals by default. And this attitude keeps us in permanent fear and humiliation, it’s like we have no right to a dignified life.”

Daler is one of the many migrants from Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, and Uzbekistan that Human Rights Watch interviewed between September and November 2024. Their stories add poignancy of lived experience to expert opinions on the human rights situation of Central Asian migrants in Russia by migration experts, lawyers, representatives of local and international nongovernmental organizations that Human Rights Watch also interviewed between July and November 2024.

The March 22, 2024 attack on Crocus City Hall near Moscow, allegedly orchestrated by the ISIS-Khorasan group known to recruit Central Asians, precipitated an escalation of xenophobia and violence against Central Asian migrants and other non-Slavic looking individuals in Russia. Ultra-nationalist Russian social media channels have published videos of violence against Central Asians tagged as “Revenge for Crocus City Hall.”

Media and human rights organizations have documented a wide range of abuses, including the refusal of services, job dismissals, physical intimidation, and violent attacks on individuals and property.

While failing to condemn these xenophobic actions, Russian authorities have also intensified their targeting of Central Asian migrants. According to Russian media, the Russian authorities deported 85,800 migrants—many from Central Asia— in the first six months of 2024, double the number for the same period in 2023. Raids, arbitrary arrests, prolonged detention, and mass deportations for minor infractions have become more frequent. Many face arbitrary multi-day detentions at airports, followed by deportation without explanation. Following the concert hall attack, there has been a spike in police harassment and ethnic profiling of Central Asians.

In 2024, Russian policymakers also adopted harsher migration-related legislation, including a conceptually new “expulsion regime,” which significantly curtails civic rights of migrants in Russia. While President Vladimir Putin has publicly cautioned against using the concert hall attack to justify xenophobia, he has linked “illegal migration” to extremist activity, effectively reinforcing anti-migrant sentiments. This rhetoric is consistent with the ongoing trend in the Russian parliament and state-owned media, where politicians and public figures have been promoting anti-migrant policies and making racist statements with impunity.

The current crisis is unfolding against the backdrop of Russia's full-scale war in Ukraine and increased conscription of Central Asian migrants and recently naturalized citizens. As of June 2024, nearly 30,000 new Russian citizens of Central Asian descent have been registered for military service, with 10,000 deployed to occupied territories, according to Russian media. Non-citizen migrants have reported being duped into recruitment for the war effort under the guise of regular construction jobs or service contracts.

Governments have an obligation under international human rights law to protect the right to life and security of everyone within their country without discrimination. Key international actors should urge the Russian authorities to categorically condemn and effectively investigate all xenophobic attacks against Central Asian (and other) ethnic minorities in Russia. The government should retract abusive legislation that significantly curtails the rights of migrants, including through the “expulsion regime.” The Russian authorities should declare zero tolerance for anti-migrant hate speech, including by its own officials, and guarantee a normal climate for labor for migrants from Central Asia and other territories.

Recommendations

Recommendations to the Government of Russia

- Develop and adopt comprehensive anti-discrimination legislation in line with international human rights standards, including the prohibition of discrimination based on ethnic or national origin, nationality or immigration status.
- Condemn xenophobic violence and harassment and introduce zero tolerance for anti-migrant speech and other xenophobic statements by public officials.
- Increase efforts to fight xenophobia and discrimination of migrants, including through programs directed at changing public perception of migrants and addressing negative stereotyping of migrants in the media.
- Ensure prompt and effective investigation into cases of xenophobic and/or racist discrimination and violence against migrants and their family members, irrespective of their migration status, and non-ethnically Russian naturalized citizens.
- Establish a hotline for migrants from Central Asia who have faced violent attacks, harassment, discrimination, and other abuses; ensure that hot line operators speak national languages of Central Asian countries to facilitate communication.
- Address proliferation of violent far-right groups targeting Central Asian migrants in xenophobic attacks and publicizing such attacks on social media by investigating all published cases and holding the perpetrators to account.
- Ensure that law enforcement agencies are free of anti-migrant bias and do not collaborate with vigilante and other ultra-nationalist groups.
- Provide regular awareness training and education to government officials, law enforcement (including border guards), and the judiciary in excluding xenophobic bias in decision-making concerning migrants.
- Ensure clear, stable, and accessible procedures for obtaining work and residence permits for migrants.
- Declare a zero-tolerance policy on ethnic profiling by law enforcement officers towards migrants and representatives of ethnic minorities, including naturalized citizens of non-Slavic appearance; ensure government officials and law enforcement officers engaging in ethnic profiling are subjected to disciplinary measures.
- Put an immediate end to the practice of forcing or coercing migrants to sign contracts with the Ministry of Defense under threat of deportation or punishment.

- Improve conditions in temporary detention centers to meet international standards, including ensuring detainees are treated in a humane and dignified manner.
- Ensure that migrants held in custody are provided with necessary hygienic products and unobstructed access to well-ventilated facilities and ensure they have adequate food and access to quality medical care. Prevent overcrowding, including through offering alternatives to detention.
- Immediately end the use of beatings and other ill-treatment of migrant detainees in temporary detention centers, establish clear rules of conduct for migration detention officers, bring to account officers that violate these rules.
- Ensure needs of cisgender and transgender women and transgender men migrant detainees are met and protected, including treatment with humanity and dignity, establishing effective systems for preventing and reporting sexual and gender-based violence, and providing adequate sexual and reproductive health care.
- Enact legislation and implement policies to abolish the temporary migration detention of children and families, regardless of nationality or citizenship status.
- Adopt alternatives to detention that fulfill the best interests of the child and allow children to remain with their family members or guardians in noncustodial, community-based settings.
- Rescind amendments to the Law on Legal Status of Foreign Citizens that created a “regime of expulsion” that significantly restricts the rights and mobility of migrants placed into the regime.
- Ensure the right of children of foreign citizens to education regardless of their registration status or that of their parents.
- Rescind the Russian language proficiency requirement for migrant children to enroll in public schools, design and implement accelerated Russian language programs for non-Russian language proficient students through the government school system.
- Establish comprehensive integration support programs by funding free Russian language courses and supporting community centers for migrants to facilitate their successful integration into Russian society.
- Address housing discrimination, including by imposing penalties on landlords who refuse potential tenants on the basis of their ethnicity.
- Ratify the International Convention on the Protection of the Rights of All Migrant Workers and Members of their Families.

- Provide free and independent access to human rights groups to monitor the situation of migrant workers held in temporary detention centers.
- Issue a standing invitation to the UN Special Rapporteur on the Rights of Migrants, and the Special Rapporteur on Torture and Other Cruel, Inhuman, and Degrading Treatment or Punishment to conduct country visits.
- Implement the recommendations of the concluding observations by the Committee on the Elimination of Racial Discrimination published in June 2023 following its review of Russia concerning incidents of hate crime and hate speech against those vulnerable to them such as [among others] migrants, specifically outlined in para 15:
 - Develop a system for filing complaints of incidents of hate crime and hate speech, and ensure the system's accessibility and availability to those who are vulnerable to racist hate crimes and hate speech, such as members of Roma communities and other ethnic minorities, Indigenous Peoples, migrants and people of African descent, and take effective measures, including through awareness-raising campaigns, to encourage the reporting of racist hate speech and hate crimes;
 - Strengthen its efforts to combat the spread of racist hate speech in the media, on the Internet and in social media, in close cooperation with media outlets, Internet service providers and social media platforms, as well as with members of groups vulnerable to racist hate speech;
 - Firmly condemn any form of hate speech and distance itself from racist hate speech expressed by politicians and public figures, including members of the parliament and religious leaders, and ensure that such acts are investigated and adequately punished;
 - Assess and strengthen its system for collecting data on complaints of racist hate speech and racially motivated crimes, on prosecutions on convictions and on penalties imposed with regard to such acts pursuant to article 4 of the Convention, and include relevant statistics in its next periodic report.

Recommendations for the Governments of Kyrgyzstan, Uzbekistan, and Tajikistan

- Continue condemning publicly and through bi- and multi-lateral official channels xenophobic violence and harassment of citizens of Kyrgyzstan, Uzbekistan, and

Tajikistan in Russia, and demand zero tolerance from the Russian authorities for anti-migrant speech and other xenophobic statements by public officials.

- Strengthen consular support, including in remote areas distant from urban centers, to citizens who reside in Russia and experience xenophobic discrimination and violence, including by establishing 24/7 emergency hotlines, providing operative and mobile legal support, and denouncing promptly any anti-migrant legal initiatives by Russian authorities.
- Engage with Russian authorities to request unimpeded consular access to temporary detention facilities where Central Asian migrants are being held.
- Ensure embassy officials promptly and at frequent intervals visit detained migrants to verify they have access to space, food, water, adequate medical treatment, sanitation, and legal support.
- Continue utilizing social media and other online tools, and coordinating with diaspora groups, to increase reach among migrant workers, especially to educate them about their rights, laws and how they can access available support resources.
- Continue providing free legal consultations by the relevant labor and employment ministries for those planning to work in Russia.
- Continue developing and distributing widely information about migrant-related laws, policies and regulations in Russia, as well as information about consular support available to migrants in Russia. Ensure that such information is available in print and online and is visible at airport and border crossings Central Asian migrants use on their journey to Russia.
- Assist the migrant returnees with the reintegration process, including providing health and psychosocial services.
- Press Russian authorities bi- and multi-laterally to investigate and hold to account the violent far-right groups who target Central Asian migrants.
- Urge the Russian authorities to develop clear, stable, and accessible procedures for obtaining work and residence permits for migrants from Kyrgyzstan, Uzbekistan, Tajikistan in Russia.
- Strengthen bilateral labor agreements with Russia that include strong worker protections and standardized recruitment practices to ensure fair treatment of migrant workers.
- Urge Russian authorities to rescind the Russian language proficiency requirement that is preventing migrant children from enrolling in public schools and to design

and implement accelerated Russian language programs for school-aged children through the government school system.

- Continue calling on the Russian authorities to ratify the International Convention on the Protection of the Rights of All Migrant Workers and Members of their Families.

Recommendations for the UN Agencies and procedures

- Advocate to Russian authorities to develop and adopt comprehensive anti-discrimination legislation in line with international human rights standards, including the prohibition of discrimination based on ethnic or national origin, nationality or immigration status.
- Publicly call on the Russian government to halt collective expulsions and deportations of migrants from Central Asia, and to end detention of migrants awaiting deportation.
- Pressure Russian authorities to grant the International Organization for Migration (IOM), the Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights (OHCHR), the Special Rapporteur on the Rights of Migrants, and the Special Rapporteur on Torture and Other Cruel, Inhuman, and Degrading Treatment or Punishment unfettered and unscheduled access to temporary detention centers for migrants to monitor conditions of confinement and to provide assistance if needed.
- Urge the Russian government to improve conditions of detention and bring them into compliance with international human rights standards.
- Provide the Russian government with guidance on best practices and international standards for developing alternatives to detention.
- Urge the Russian government to end forced military recruitment among migrants as an alternative to their impending deportation.

To Members of the United Nations Human Rights Council

- Support establishment of a mechanism to monitor rights abuses at borders, as called for by civil society and the Special Rapporteur on the human rights of migrants at the 53rd session of the Human Rights Council.

To the UN High Commissioner for Human Rights

- Closely monitor and publicly report on the human rights of Central Asian migrants in the Russian Federation, publicly express concern about restrictive migration policies such as the “expulsion regime” that put the rights of migrants at risk and call on the Russian Federation to end those policies and practices.

To the UN Special Rapporteur on the human rights of migrants and the UN Special Rapporteur on the situation of human rights in the Russian Federation

- Document the impact of restrictive migration policies and protection gaps on migrants’ rights, where possible through visits to Russia and report to the Human Rights Council on the situation.

Recommendations for the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE) and its Participating States

- Call on Russia to implement its obligations as an OSCE participating state to protect and promote the fundamental human rights of migrants, including economic, social and cultural rights, and their social welfare.¹
- Condemn publicly discrimination on the grounds of race, color, and ethnic origin, and the lack of measures taken to prevent intolerance and xenophobia against migrant workers.²
- Urge the Russian authorities to create conditions to foster integration and greater harmony in relations between migrant workers and the rest of the society in which they reside, including by raising awareness about the enriching contribution of migrants to society and by enabling migrant workers to participate in the life of the society where they lawfully reside.³

¹ See the Helsinki Final Act 1975, the Madrid Document 1983, the Copenhagen Document 1990, the Charter of Paris for a New Europe 1990, the Moscow Document 1991, and the Vienna Document 1989.

² See the Moscow Document 1991, the Budapest Document 1994, the Ministerial Council Decision No. 4/03 on Tolerance and Non-Discrimination, and the Permanent Council Decision No. 6210n Tolerance and the Fight against Racism, Xenophobia and Discrimination, annexed to the Ministerial Council Decision No. 12/04 on Tolerance and Non-discrimination.

³ See the Moscow Document of 1991, the Helsinki Document 1992, the Budapest Document 1994, the Ministerial Council Decision No. 4/03 on Tolerance and Non-Discrimination, and the Permanent Council Decision No. 6210n Tolerance and the Fight against Racism, Xenophobia and Discrimination, annexed to the Ministerial Council Decision No. 12/04 on Tolerance and Non-discrimination.

- Call on the Russian, Kyrgyz, Uzbek, and Tajik authorities to cooperate in ensuring orderly movements of workers through collaborations between host and origin countries; deal jointly with the problems arising from the migration of workers; cooperate to further improve the general situation of migrant workers and their families in Russia.⁴

⁴ See the Helsinki Final Act 1975 and the Madrid Document 1983.

Methodology

This report documents and exposes xenophobic violence and human rights violations, including forced military recruitment, against Central Asian migrants in Russia by both private and state actors. It is based on Human Rights Watch research conducted remotely between June and November 2024, with respondents from Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, Uzbekistan, and Russia.

Human Rights Watch interviewed 20 Central Asian migrants with experience of migrant labor in Russia over the past several years—seven from Kyrgyzstan, nine from Tajikistan, and four from Uzbekistan—ranging in age from 23 to 45. Most of the migrants had recently returned from Russia, and seven were based in Russia at the time of the interview. Most of the respondents were men with the exception of one transgender woman and one transgender man.

Interviews were conducted in Russian or Kyrgyz language over various messaging apps. Human Rights Watch informed all interviewees of the purpose of the interview and how information collected would be used. We received verbal consent recorded on audio before conducting the interview. No incentives were provided for interviewees. Human Rights Watch also spoke with 24 experts and lawyers from local and international nongovernmental organizations and United Nations agencies working on migration.

Human Rights Watch also reviewed laws, government data, academic research, and media articles, as well as an archived video database collected by the Nazi Video Monitoring Project, which keeps track of videos of xenophobic and hate-motivated attacks published in the past two years by perpetrators on various far-right Russian social media channels. Where possible, Human Rights Watch verified the date of publication. Human Rights Watch has chosen not to provide links to the videos of attacks referenced in this report in order not to contribute to further spread of hate propaganda.

Human Rights Watch sent letters of inquiry to the ministries of foreign affairs and of labor in Kyrgyzstan, Uzbekistan, and Tajikistan, as well as to the Ministry of Interior Affairs in Russia. Only the government of Kyrgyzstan responded, and we have reflected their

response below (“Crocus City Hall Attack” section). It is also available as an appendix at the end of the report.

Names of the migrants interviewed for this report and other personal data were withheld in the interests of their security and privacy; names of experts were provided in full except when requested otherwise.

I. Background

Russia and Central Asia

Dating back to the 17th century, Russian authorities have viewed the nations of Central Asia as inferior and adopted a colonial mindset, seeing Russia as having a “civilizing mission” in the region, akin to how European powers viewed their relationship with colonized peoples. The attitudes persist in modern Russian society.⁵ The Soviet era, while promoting limited cultural autonomy and multinationalism, suppressed nationalist sentiments in the five republics. The Soviet state aimed to create a unified “Soviet People” while maintaining centralized power in the hands of ethnic Slavs, particularly Russians.

Since the dissolution of the Soviet Union in 1991, Russia has maintained a varying but significant influence over the Central Asian countries. These new relationships have been fraught with challenges, including those pertinent to migration and xenophobia—the latter fueled by an ingrained sense of the superiority of “Great Russia” over the smaller republics. At the same time, Russia's reliance on migrant labor has been a longstanding feature of its economy, driven by an acute workforce shortage. As of 2023, the median age in Russia was approaching 40, a demographic trend that Russia’s Academy of Sciences assumes to have contributed to a shortage of 4.8 million workers in 2023.⁶

To address this substantial gap in its labor force, Russia has consistently turned to migrant labor, particularly from former Soviet states.⁷ The majority of Russia's migrant workforce originates from remittance-dependent Central Asian countries, notably Kyrgyzstan (262,000 in 2024), Tajikistan (1,231,000 in 2024), and Uzbekistan (1,792,000 in 2024).⁸

⁵ Jurgen Osterhammel, “The Great Work of Uplifting Mankind,” in *Zivilisierungsmissionen: Imperiale Weltverbesserung*, eds. B. Barth & J. Osterhammel (UVK Verlag, 2005).

⁶ Bulletin of the Institute of Economics of the Russian Academy of Sciences, “Russian Economy Under Sanctions: Dynamics and Structural Changes” (“Российская экономика в условиях санкционных ограничений: динамика и структурные изменения”), June 2023, <https://vestnik-ieran.ru/index.php/component/jdownloads/send/19-2023-n6-articles/136-vart-2023-6-p7-25> (accessed December 15, 2024).

⁷ Urinboyev, R., Eraliev, S., “Russian and Turkish Migration Regimes in a Comparative Perspective,” in *The Political Economy of Non-Western Migration Regimes*, (Palgrave Macmillan, Cham, 2022), https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-030-99256-9_2.

⁸ “We Really Do Not Know Who Is Coming to Us” (“Мы реально не знаем кто к нам едет”), *Kommersant*, September 19, 2024, <https://www.kommersant.ru/doc/7166241> (accessed January 7, 2025).

Of the three, Kyrgyzstan maintains the closest alignment with Russia through membership in both the Collective Security Treaty Organization (CSTO) and the Eurasian Economic Union (EEU), which provides economic benefits to the country, including migration privileges to Kyrgyz citizens.⁹ Tajikistan, while not an EEU member, relies heavily on Russia for security, hosts Russia's largest foreign military base in terms of manpower, and is also economically dependent via the labor migration of its citizens to Russia.¹⁰ Uzbekistan has historically maintained geopolitical autonomy from Russia, although Uzbek citizens make up the largest number of Central Asian labor migrants in Russia.¹¹

The economic incentive for Central Asian migrant workers is clear: in 2023, average monthly wages as a percentage of Russian levels were 41.9 percent in Uzbekistan, 38.8 percent in Kyrgyzstan, and 19.6 percent in Tajikistan.¹²

Human Rights Watch previously documented abuses of migrant workers during Russia's domestic construction boom in 2009, finding that many suffered exploitation and abuse by their employers, employment agencies, intermediaries, and law enforcement. In severe cases, migrant workers were trafficked into forced labor.¹³

Respondents noted that police and other public officials participated in the abuses, including extortion, physical abuse, and being forced to do menial tasks during document checks. Despite legal protections, the Russian government had largely failed to hold employers and officials accountable.¹⁴

⁹ Aijan Sharshenova, "Mapping Russia's Influence in the Kyrgyz Republic," report for European Neighborhood Council Analysis, 2021, <https://www.encouncil.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/09/Mapping-Russias-Influence-in-the-Kyrgyz-Republic.docx-1.pdf> (accessed November 2, 2024).

¹⁰ Agnieszka Rogozinska, Aleksander Ksawery Olech, "The Russian Federation's Military Bases Abroad," report for Institute of New Europe, 2020, <https://ine.org.pl/wp-content/uploads/2020/12/THE-RUSSIAN-FEDERATIONS-MILITARY-BASES-ABROAD-1.pdf> (accessed January 12, 2025).

¹¹ Ildar Yakubov, "Opportunities and Limits of Cooperation Between Uzbekistan and Russia," Cabar.Asia (Institute for War and Peace Reporting), July 12, 2021, <https://cabar.asia/en/opportunities-and-limits-of-cooperation-between-uzbekistan-and-russia> (accessed January 12, 2025).

¹² World Bank, Migration and Development Brief 40, June 2024, <https://documents1.worldbank.org/curated/en/099714008132436612/pdf/IDU1aocf73b51fcad1425a1aoddcc8f2f3331ce.pdf> (accessed January 12, 2025).

¹³ Human Rights Watch, "Are You Happy to Cheat Us?" Exploitation of Migrant Construction Workers In Russia, February 2009, <https://www.hrw.org/report/2009/02/10/are-you-happy-cheat-us/exploitation-migrant-construction-workers-russia>.

¹⁴ Ibid.

In a 2013 report on migrant labor involved in building facilities for and providing services during the Sochi Winter Olympics, Human Rights Watch documented widespread non-payment or severe delays in wages, excessive working hours, overcrowded and inadequate employer-provided housing, and poor-quality food. Workers often lacked employment contracts or access to their personal documents, leaving them vulnerable to exploitation and retaliation, including expulsion from Russia. While the Russian government and private companies involved were legally obligated to ensure labor protections, abuses persisted, highlighting systemic failures in safeguarding workers' rights on Olympic construction sites.¹⁵

In 2016 and 2017 in the run up to Russia hosting the FIFA 2018 World Cup, Human Rights Watch investigated the construction of stadiums and infrastructure for the mega-sporting event. The Russian government invested heavily, employing tens of thousands of workers for this task, mostly Central Asian labor migrants who faced exploitation (non-payment, underpayment or delays of wages), poor and unsafe working conditions, and little recourse for abuses due to, in many cases, lack of legal employment contracts.¹⁶

Throughout the past 30 years, in addition to abuses by Russian authorities, Central Asian labor migrants have also faced violence by far-right groups.¹⁷ Too often, there have been no consequences for perpetrators, the state practicing "managed nationalism," simultaneously exploiting and attempting to control far-right sentiments.¹⁸

Far-right violence and targeting of Central Asians picked up pace with Russia's invasion of Ukraine in 2022, with a steadily growing number and variety of incidents.¹⁹

¹⁵Human Rights Watch, *Race to the Bottom: Exploitation of Migrant Workers Ahead of Russia's 2014 Winter Olympic Games in Sochi*, February 2013, <https://www.hrw.org/report/2013/02/06/race-bottom/exploitation-migrant-workers-ahead-russias-2014-winter-olympic-games>

¹⁶Human Rights Watch, *Red Card: Exploitation of Construction Workers on World Cup Sites in Russia*, June 2017, <https://www.hrw.org/report/2017/06/14/red-card/exploitation-construction-workers-world-cup-sites-russia>

¹⁷ Nazi Video Monitoring Project, "How Neo-Nazi Violence Was Reborn in Russia With the War," November 3, 2024, <https://nvmpproject.com/news/nazi-war-background>, (accessed December 2, 2025).

¹⁸ Alexander C. Nehrbass, "The Putinist Nation: Putin and Russian Nationalism as a Regime Strategy," *International Journal of Russian studies*: 2020, https://www.ijors.net/issue9_2_2020/articles/nehrbass.html, (accessed January 7, 2025).

¹⁹ Nazi Video Monitoring Project, "How Neo-Nazi Violence Was Reborn in Russia With the War," November 3, 2024, <https://nvmpproject.com/news/nazi-war-background>, (accessed December 2, 2025).

Crocus City Hall Attack

On March 22, 2024, a group of gunmen dressed in camouflage attacked people at the Crocus City Hall, a large concert venue just outside Moscow. The attackers also used incendiary devices to set the venue on fire. At least 144 people died in the attack; 551 were wounded.²⁰ The Islamic State-Khorasan (ISIS-K), known to recruit mainly among Central Asians, claimed responsibility for the attack.

The Russian Federal Security Service (FSB) initially detained four suspects, all citizens of Tajikistan, then another 16 people. In the week following the attack, Russian law enforcement engaged in the blatant torture of at least two men who were held as suspects, with photographs and videos of the arrests and torture, presumably taken by law enforcement officials, appearing and then widely shared on Telegram channels that cover Russian military and security offices.²¹

The FSB placed 12 suspects, identified as “natives of Central Asia,” under arrest; detention of the main four suspects was in February 2025 extended until March 24, 2025.^{22 23}

The attack added further tension to the relations between Russia and Central Asian countries.

Russian authorities carried out numerous abusive raids targeting “illegal migrants” and expelled close to 86,000 migrants in the first six months of 2024, double the number for

²⁰ “Russian Emergency Situations Ministry: Crocus Attack Death Toll Reaches 144,” Interfax, April 1, 2024, <https://interfax.com/newsroom/top-stories/100914> (accessed December 18, 2024).

²¹ “Russia: Shameful Pride in Torture of Terrorism Suspects,” Human Rights Watch news release, March 29, 2024, <https://www.hrw.org/news/2024/03/29/russia-shameful-pride-torture-terrorism-suspects>.

²² “The Basmannyi District Court of Moscow Extended Their Pre-trial Detention Till February 22, 2025 While the Criminal Investigation Is Underway,” TASS, November 20, 2024, <https://tass.ru/proisshestviya/22455713> (accessed December 18, 2024).

“The Court Extended Arrest of Suspected Implementers of the ‘Crocus’ Terrorist Attack” (“Суд продлил арест предполагаемым исполнителям теракта в ‘Крокус’”), *RIA*, February 19, 2025, <https://ria.ru/20250219/arrest-2000257989.html> (accessed March 3, 2025).

²³ “FSB of Russia detained abettors of the Crocus City Hall terrorist attack” (“ФСБ России задержаны пособники террористического акта в Крокус Сити Холл”), FSB, April 4, 2024, [h%3D10439966%40fsbMessage.html](https://www.fsb.ru/press/message/single.htm%21id%3D10439966%40fsbMessage.html) (accessed December 20, 2024).

the same period in 2023.²⁴ Nearly one fifth of those, 17,000, were Tajik nationals, whereas in the whole of 2023 Russia deported 11,000 Tajik nationals.²⁵

This increase in expulsions follows an upward trend regarding the harsh treatment of migrants in general in recent years. Based on an analysis by Human Rights Watch of official data from the Russian Ministry of Interior Affairs, in 2023 the ministry over 100,000 foreign citizens from Russia and banned 173,300 from entry.²⁶ The figure for those banned was 22.7 percent higher than the 2022 figure.²⁷

Following the post-Crocus crackdown, Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan authorities issued several advisories to their respective citizens working in Russia as labor migrants noting “additional security measures and enhanced border controls” in Russia. The Tajikistani embassy in Russia issued an advisory on September 10, 2024²⁸ similar to the one the Kyrgyzstani Ministry of Foreign Affairs had issued on September 5, 2024.²⁹ The Ministry of Foreign Affairs followed that initial advisory with a warning on November 7, 2024 that migrants should be prepared for “enhanced border controls” and to be “ready for entry refusals,” citing the controls as legitimate anti-terrorism measures by Russia following the Crocus City Hall attack.³⁰

In its November 26, 2024, response to a request from Human Rights Watch for comment, the Kyrgyzstani Ministry of Foreign Affairs said there had been intense communication with their Russian counterparts on protecting the rights of Kyrgyzstani migrants in Russia, and

²⁴ “In the First Six Month Russia deported 39.5 thousand migrants” (“В первом полугодии за нарушения закона из РФ выдворили 39,5 тыс. мигрантов”), Regnum, July 30, 2024, <https://regnum.ru/news/3905406> (accessed December 20, 2024).

²⁵ “A Record Number of Tajik Migrants Deported from Russia in Half a Year” (“Из России за полгода выдворили рекордное число мигрантов из Таджикистана”), Regnum, August 6, 2024, <https://regnum.ru/news/3907025> (accessed December 20, 2024).

²⁶ <https://xn--b1aew.xn--p1ai/dejatelnost/statistics/migracionnaya/item/47183542/>

²⁷ Human Rights Watch’s own analysis of data on removals and bans from the Russian Interior Affairs Ministry.

²⁸ Embassy of Tajikistan in Russia, official Telegram channel, “Recommendation to citizens of Tajikistan,” September 10, 2024, https://t.me/tajembassy_ru/1820 (accessed December 20, 2024).

²⁹ “MFA recommends citizens of Kyrgyzstan to refrain from non-urgent visits to Russia” (“МИД призывает граждан КР воздержаться от поездок в Россию если нет веских оснований”), Kaktus Media, May 2, 2024, https://kaktus.media/doc/500630_mid_prizyvaet_grajdan_kr_vosderjatsia_ot_poezdok_v_rossiu_esli_net_veskih_osnova_ny.html (accessed December 20, 2024).

³⁰ Kyrgyz Ministry of Foreign Affairs, “Information for Citizens of Kyrgyzstan planning a visit to Russia,” July 11, 2024, <https://mfa.gov.kg/ru/osnovnoe-menyu/press-sluzhba/novosti/informacionnoe-soobshchenie-mid-kr-dlya-grazhdan-kyrgyzskoy-respubliki-planiruyushchih-poezdku-v-rossiyskuyu-federaciyu> (accessed December 20, 2024).

ensuring that employment restrictions developed as part of the more securitized migration policy in Russia would not affect Kyrgyz citizens due to Kyrgyzstan's membership in the Eurasian Economic Union.

Although not mentioned in the response from the Kyrgyzstani government, Human Rights Watch has seen that the Center for Employment of Citizens Abroad – a governmental agency under the Ministry of Labor and Social Welfare – has prepared a F.A.Q. addressing changes in the Russian legislation on migration and has published a regularly updated database of Kyrgyzstani migrants who might have a temporary ban on entry to Russia.

In August 2024 the Ministry of Labor and Social Welfare signed a memorandum of cooperation with the Russian non-profit organization “Center for Legal Support and Mediation in Resolving Labor Disputes and Assistance to Social and Labor Adaptation of Migrant Citizens” based on which the Russian organization is expected to support Kyrgyzstani citizens during their employment in Russia.

In late 2024 the Ministry has also launched a “Mekenim 1+1” (“Homeland 1+1”) project, which promises to provide returning migrants with financial support to start their business in an amount equal to the migrants' own investment.³¹

On February 20, 2025, the Deputy Minister of Foreign Affairs of Kyrgyzstan, Almaz Imangaziev, issued a note of protest to Russia's ambassador in Kyrgyzstan concerning Russia's restrictive legislative measures, including the Russian language proficiency requirement for children of migrants in school enrolment.³²

Foreign Affairs Ministries of Tajikistan, Uzbekistan, and Russia did not provide responses to Human Rights Watch's request for comment.

³¹ “Migrants in Kyrgyzstan to Receive Help In Opening Businesses” (“Мигранта в Кыргызстане помогут открыт бизнес”), *Molbulak*, November 10, 2024, <https://www.molbulak.ru/news/kyrgyzstan/migrantam-v-kyrgyzstane-pomogut-otkryt-biznes> (accessed February 27, 2025).

³² ³² “New Rules for Migrants, Children and Russian Language: MFA Sends Notes of Protest to Russian Ambassador” (“Новые правила для мигрантов, дети и русский язык: МИД вручил ноты послу России”), *24.kg*, February 20, 2025, https://24.kg/vlast/320483_noviye_pravila_dlya_migrantov_deti_irusskiy_yazyik_mid_vruchil_notyi_poslu_rossii/ (accessed February 27, 2025).

However, experts at the Dushanbe office of the International Center for Migration Policy Development (ICMPD), an international organization with 21 member states working on development of safer migration policies and programs, have shared with Human Rights Watch that, following a series of cooperation meetings in 2023 between Tajikistani and Russian authorities on regulating labor migration between the two countries, an official scheme of organized labor hiring which aims to guarantee labor rights of Tajikistani migrants coming to Russia.³³

The Tajikistani Ministry of Labor, Migration and Employment of Population also runs the Pre-departure Center for Overseas Employment and the Overseas Employment Agency that support Tajikistani citizens preparing for labor migration abroad, including by sharing relevant legal requirements as they change in the countries of destination. ICMPD's Migrant Resource Center in Dushanbe also works with the Ministry of Labor to advise on practical aspects of labor migration.

In Uzbekistan, a Migration Agency under the Cabinet of Ministers was established by presidential decree in October 2024. The agency focuses on regulating and monitoring organized external labor migration, licensing private employment agencies, and preparing personnel to work on labor migration. The Agency is also expected to cooperate with foreign agencies on temporary employment and protect the labor rights of Uzbekistani citizens.³⁴

Additionally, according to the decree, the Migration Agency will operate a fund to provide assistance to Uzbekistani citizens who have faced violence, forced labor, or discrimination while working abroad. The fund is intended to help cover the cost of medical care needed by migrants who were injured or became sick while working abroad. The fund will cover vocational training for migrants as well. Human Rights Watch did not speak to anyone who received financial assistance from this fund.

³³ "Migration of Population" ("Миграция населения"), Tajik Ministry of Labor, Migration, and Employment of Population website, no date, <https://mehnat.tj/ru/activity/workmigration> (accessed February 27, 2025).

³⁴ "Agency of Migration Established Under Cabinet of Ministers of Uzbekistan" ("Агентство миграции образовано при Кабинете министров Узбекистана"), *Gazeta.UZ*, October 25, 2024, <https://www.gazeta.uz/ru/2024/10/25/migration-agency/> (accessed February 27, 2025).

Labor Migration Policy in Russia

The legal framework governing migrant labor in Russia has changed several times in recent decades, becoming more and more strictly regulated.³⁵

Russia's first migrant labor law was adopted in 2002, introducing standardized work permit registration and contributing to the increase in the number of labor migrants from 175,000 in 2001 to 570,000 in 2006. However, a work permit could only be obtained based on an invitation issued by an employer, who was first required to obtain a special license for hiring foreign nationals. As the process was cumbersome, many migrants, including from the former Soviet states, worked without a permit, taking advantage of the visa-free entry.³⁶

This 2002 law has been amended several times and supplemented by new regulations that introduced increasingly complex measures such as migration cards, quotas for residence permits, and stringent registration requirements.

Russian citizenship laws have also evolved significantly since the fall of the Soviet Union, with about 8.5 million people becoming Russian citizens between 1992 and 2015, and 3.8 million between 2015 and 2023.³⁷ Initially, a liberal policy allowed easy naturalization for post-Soviet state residents through a simple application process. This required only a temporary residence permit and a brief 1.5-year waiting period. As a result, many citizens from Uzbekistan, Tajikistan, and Kyrgyzstan obtained Russian citizenship at the time, some within just three months of arrival.

The Eurasian Economic Union (EEU) treaty, signed in 2014 by Belarus, Kazakhstan, and Russia, and later by Armenia and Kyrgyzstan, exempts member-state citizens from certain registration requirements and provides various rights and benefits in the sphere of labor migration. Under the EEU treaty, migrants and their families are exempt from requirements

³⁵ Olga Chudinovskikh, Mikhail Denisenko, "Russia: A Migration System with Soviet Roots," Migration Information Source, May 18, 2017, <https://www.migrationpolicy.org/article/russia-migration-system-soviet-roots> (accessed October 7, 2024).

³⁶ Ibid

³⁷ "Number of Persons Who Acquired Russian Citizenship from 2015 to mid-2023," Statista, April 9, 2024, <https://www.statista.com/statistics/1135440/number-of-granted-russian-citizenships/> (accessed October 9, 2024).

that they register within 30 days of entering the territory of another member state, as most new arrivals must do.³⁸

However, for citizens of non-EEU countries, notably Uzbekistan and Tajikistan, Russia's migration policy became more complicated, requiring additional steps, such as acquiring a work permit known as a "patent," securing temporary residence documents, and successfully completing examinations on Russian language, history, and law. All of this must be completed within 30-days of arrival—a requirement that many migrants from Uzbekistan and Tajikistan have struggled to fulfill, and so instead many go undocumented or seek Russian citizenship if they have the relevant documentation.

However, even with legalized status, be it as naturalized citizens or labor migrants with the necessary permits, many Central Asians continue to grapple with "documentary uncertainty," as their status is at risk of being constantly in question due to Russia's convoluted migration regime.³⁹ This has created a paradoxical situation of "legal illegality," where migrants can hold valid documents and still be considered "illegal" due to various technical infractions, administrative requirements, or blatant abuse of power by corrupt officials.⁴⁰ Living in such precarious conditions has long made Central Asians vulnerable to undeserved expulsions and deportation.⁴¹

According to a researcher on migration, Nodira Kholmatova:⁴²

At the core of this treatment is racialization—it's a historical fact, through the Tsarist empire and the Soviet Union—people from Central Asian and Caucasus and other territories were racialized as a labor force to boost the agricultural economy, but not as equal citizens. What we are seeing today is a continuity in the instrumentalization of migrants as a human resource

³⁸ Agreement on the Eurasian Economic Union, signed on May 29, 2014, Article 97, part 6, undated, <https://all-migration.com/laws/federal/dogovor-o-evraziyskom-ekonomicheskoy-soyuz/> (accessed November 2, 2024).

³⁹ See Madeleine Reeves, "Clean Fake: Authenticating Documents and Persons in Migrant Moscow," *American Ethnologist*, 2013, <https://anthrosource.onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/epdf/10.1111/amet.12036> (accessed December 7, 2024).

⁴⁰ Ibid

⁴¹ Irina Kuznetsova, "Dangerous and Unwanted: Policy and Everyday Discourses of Migrants in Russia," *E-International Relations*, 2017, <https://www.e-ir.info/2017/04/28/dangerous-and-unwanted-policy-and-everyday-discourses-of-migrants-in-russia/> (accessed December 7, 2024).

⁴² Human Rights Watch Microsoft Teams interview with Nadira Kholmatova, migration researcher at University of Amsterdam, November 7, 2024.

that could be repurposed not just for labor purposes but also for the areas the Russian government needs, including coerced mobilization to war against Ukraine.

II. Targeting of Migrants by State and Non-State Actors in Russia

Central Asian migrants have long been subject to arbitrary application of complicated administrative regulations and migration laws, with the smallest infractions often leading to their expulsion and deportation. The situation worsened considerably following the March 2024 Crocus City Hall attack.

In June 2024, chairman of the Russia’s chief investigation agency Aleksandr Bastrykin noted at a meeting on countering migration-related crime that it was imperative to continue police raids aimed at identifying violations of migration legislation and enforcing military mobilization of naturalized citizens.⁴³ He added that: “anti-social behavior of immigrants and their children has a serious destructive potential,” and that “police reports include a growing number of incidents, which are causing public dissatisfaction with the migration situation.”

At the same time as police-led crackdowns on migrants, politicians have been fueling xenophobic sentiment against Central Asian migrants through their outbursts in parliament and the state-controlled media.

Members of Russia’s parliament—the Duma, state officials, and other public figures—regularly make inflammatory anti-migrant statements without repercussions and have promoted anti-migrant policies, as noted by the United Nations Committee on the Elimination of Racial Discrimination in 2023.⁴⁴

For example, in January 2024 during debate around the draft law on expanding reasons for stripping naturalized citizens of Russian citizenship, a Duma member representing the Communist Party of the Russian Federation (KPRF), Mikhail Matveev, said that he took a “not very academic” look and found that certain nationalities “of, say, Central Asia”

⁴³ “Chairman of Russia’s Investigative Committee Ordered Continuation of Raids in Places of Foreigner Congregation” (“Председатель СКР поручил продолжать рейды в местах скопления иностранцев”), Interfax, June 4, 2024, <https://www.interfax.ru/russia/964887> (accessed September 18, 2024).

⁴⁴ UN Committee of the Convention on Elimination of Racial Discrimination, Concluding Observations on the combined twenty-fifth and twenty-sixth periodic reports of the Russian Federation, CERD/C/RUS/CO/25-26, June 1, 2023, <https://digitallibrary.un.org/record/4012481?v=pdf> (accessed December 10, 2024).

disproportionately commit crimes, such as rape and pedophilia, while providing no evidence—“I don’t want to make it public here”—to support his allegations.⁴⁵

Another member of the Duma, Mikhail Delyagin, argued in the same discussion:

If we don't respect ourselves, wipe our feet on ourselves, how can we expect someone else to respect us? We see acts of terror by migrants all over the country, already demonstrative in nature — they are simply marking their territory. They are not called “gastarbaitery” [guest workers] anymore, because many of them don't come here to work, but to own this territory. Don't we walk the streets? Don't we see a change in the ethnic balance in Moscow?!⁴⁶

Anti-Migrant Legislative Initiatives

In summer 2024, the Duma adopted, and President Putin signed, amendments to the Code of Administrative Offences (CAO), which expand the powers of police officers and other Ministry of Interior Affairs workers, including to carry out the expulsion of migrants without judicial oversight, and to the Law on the Legal Status of Foreign Citizens, which introduced a new “expulsion regime” for foreigners who find themselves on a special “registry of controlled persons”.⁴⁷ Law enforcement, without judicial oversight, has the power to designate a migrant a “controlled person” and add them to the new registry. The amendments entered into force on February 5, 2025.⁴⁸

An expert from Insan-Leilek, a Kyrgyz NGO which provides legal and informational support to Kyrgyz labor migrants in Russia, told Human Rights Watch:

⁴⁵ Russian Duma, “Public discussion of the Law on Expanding Reasons for Stripping Naturalized Citizens of Russian Citizenship,” January 17, 2024, http://cir.duma.gov.ru/duma/document/text/?doc_id=424514&query_target=news (accessed December 14, 2024).

⁴⁶ Ibid.

⁴⁷ “Interior Ministry Officials Will Have a Right to Deport Foreigners from Russia from February 5” (“Должностные лица МВД с 5 февраля получат право на выдворение иностранцев из РФ”), TASS, January 5, 2025, <https://tass.ru/obschestvo/22820635>, (accessed January 10, 2025).

⁴⁸ Website of the President of the Russian Federation, “A Law Has Been Signed Establishing a Legal Regime For the Expulsion of Foreign Citizens Illegally Residing On the Territory of the Russian Federation” (“Подписан закон, устанавливающий правовой режим высылки иностранных граждан, незаконно находящихся на территории РФ”), August 8, 2024, <http://kremlin.ru/acts/news/74734> (accessed September 10, 2024).

Before this, you had to have at least two administrative violations to be sentenced to deportation, and now any violation can make one subject to the “expulsion regime.” This is without a trial or investigation; the police have the right to deport and prohibit entry to a labor migrant without any oversight. On what basis is this done without a trial? According to international standards, there should be a right to challenge such orders.⁴⁹

Foreigners may find themselves designated a “controlled person” and added to the “registry of controlled persons,” because their temporary residence permit, work permit, or employment contract expired or there was an enforced reduction of the period of temporary stay.⁵⁰ Significantly in October 2024, the Russian government also cut the quota for temporary residence permits for foreigners nearly in half, setting it at 5,500 permits for 2025 compared with 10,600 in 2024.⁵¹

Those on the special registry may be subject to significant restrictions on their freedom of movement, such as requiring permission from law enforcement to change place of residence and a ban on leaving the municipality where they reside.

The law also provides that police can have access to extensive personal information of migrants, including to what is referred to as “financial information”.⁵²

Additionally, as the amendments to the Law on the Legal Status of Foreign Citizens place the responsibility on employers for submitting information to the Russian Ministry of Interior Affairs about their hiring or terminating an employment contract with a migrant worker within three days, migrants' status can become “illegal” through no fault of their own if employers fail to submit this information.

⁴⁹ Human Rights Watch online interview with Rakhat Sagynbek, expert from Insan-Leilek, August 20, 2024

⁵⁰ Website of the President of the Russian Federation, “A Law Has Been Signed Establishing a Legal Regime For the Expulsion of Foreign Citizens Illegally Residing On the Territory of the Russian Federation” (“Подписан закон, устанавливающий правовой режим высылки иностранных граждан, незаконно находящихся на территории РФ”), August 8, 2024, <http://kremlin.ru/acts/news/74734> (accessed September 10, 2024).

⁵¹ <https://www.rferl.org/a/quota-residence-permits-russia-decrease-central-asia-labor-migrants/33160601.html>

⁵² Ibid.

This law also grants law enforcement agencies the power to use surveillance technologies, including geolocation and facial recognition, to monitor foreign placed on the registry of “controlled persons” and to enter premises and territories where a “controlled person” should or may be located without a court order.

The law also excludes a “controlled person” from being able to lawfully marry in Russia, and imposes restrictions on them with respect to opening bank accounts, transferring money, and carrying out financial transactions (except for limited purposes), registering as individual entrepreneurs or establishing legal entities, acquiring or selling real estate or vehicles, or registering such property with competent state agencies.⁵³

The broad powers granted to law enforcement, coupled with limited judicial oversight, under this “expulsion regime” make abuses highly likely.

As the Kyrgyz expert from Insan-Leilek, noted “This [new procedure] creates risks of corruption: the police can simply invent an offense and that's it. They could be like, ‘If you don't give me 20 thousand rubles, I will deport you.’”

Moreover, the law's implementation in the context of heightened anti-migrant rhetoric raises concerns about potential discrimination. Alexander Verkhovsky, a leading Russian researcher on xenophobia and ultra-nationalism, told Human Rights Watch:

This law supposedly deals with a range of technicalities, but it brings, among other things, a major substantive change—earlier, the law on foreign citizens had one phrase that migrants have equal rights and freedoms with citizens with certain exceptions, but now the article has evolved: non-citizens are obliged to “respect traditional values,” etc. There are no penalties for disrespect yet, but they [the authorities] may develop them.⁵⁴

⁵³ International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights, art 9, “The States Parties to the present Covenant recognize the right of everyone to social security, including social insurance”; art 11, “1. The States Parties to the present Covenant recognize the right of everyone to an adequate standard of living for himself and his family, including adequate food, clothing and housing, and to the continuous improvement of living conditions,” <https://www.ohchr.org/en/instruments-mechanism/instruments/international-covenant-economic-social-and-cultural-rights> (accessed January 8, 2025).

⁵⁴ Human Rights Watch’s online interview with Alexander Verkhovsky, director of SOVA research center, August 12, 2024.

Since taking effect in February 2025, these changes have already prevented hundreds of legal migrants from accessing their bank accounts due to technical issues with the registry system.⁵⁵ The Russian Memorial Human Rights Defense Center reports also that many legally residing foreigners have found themselves on the “registry of controlled persons,” while many foreigners who were in the process of renewing their residence and as such were temporarily “illegal” have not been included in the database.⁵⁶

By March 9, 2025, the registry had 685,000 foreigners that the Russian authorities categorized as not having legal grounds for staying in Russia.⁵⁷

In November 2024, the State Duma also adopted a new law, due to come into force on April 1, 2025, prohibiting public schools from enrolling children of foreign nationals without proof of Russian language proficiency.⁵⁸ The ban creates a systemic barrier to children’s right to education, violating Russia’s human rights obligations with respect to that right and to non-discrimination.⁵⁹

By weaponizing language proficiency as an exclusionary mechanism, the system is designed to deny migrant children access to education, to the lifelong and intergenerational economic and health benefits that education provides as well as protections from hazardous child labor and early marriage. Denying children access to school also hinders their long-term social integration. Even before the law’s adoption,

⁵⁵ “Cannot Cash Their 1.3 mln Rubles” (“Не может обналичить свои 1,3 млн рублей”), *Azattyk (Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty’s Kyrgyz Service)*, February 14, 2025, [757.html https://rus.azattyk.org/a/33314](https://rus.azattyk.org/a/33314) (accessed February 27, 2025).

⁵⁶ “Spying, Blocking of Accounts and Marriage Bans: How the New Registry of Foreigners is Working” (“Служба, блокировка счетов и запрет на брак: как работает новый реестр иностранных граждан”), *Memorial Center*, February 17, 2025, <https://memorialcenter.org/news/kak-rabotaet-novyy-reestr-inostrannyh-grazhdan> (accessed February 27, 2025).

⁵⁷ “685,000 Foreigners Included in the Russian Registry of Controlled Persons” (“В российский реестр контролируемых лиц попали 685 тысяч иностранцев”), *Meduza*, March 9, 2025, <https://meduza.io/news/2025/03/09/v-rossiyskiy-reest-kontroliruemyyh-lits-popali-685-tysyach-inostrantsev> (accessed March 10, 2025);

A December 2024 presidential decree established a grace period until April 30, 2025 during which foreigners that find themselves on the registry may legalize their stay: <https://lexpat.ru/news/vozmozhnost-legalizacii-inostrannyh-grazhdan-do-30-aprelya-2025-goda.html> (accessed March 10, 2025).

⁵⁸ “Lawmakers Move to Keep Migrants’ Children Out of Schools If They Can’t Demonstrate Russian Language Fluency,” *Meduza*, November 26, 2024, <https://meduza.io/en/news/2024/11/26/lawmakers-move-to-keep-migrants-children-out-of-schools-if-they-can-t-demonstrate-russian-language-fluency> (accessed December 20, 2024).

⁵⁹ As discussed further in section VI, Russia is a state party to the International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights (ICESCR), the Convention on the Rights of the Child (CRC), and the International Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Racial Discrimination (ICERD). Article 10 of ICESCR and article 28 of CRC stipulate that states shall make primary education compulsory and free for all. All three treaties prohibit all forms of discrimination, including on the basis of language, national origin, or other status.

some migrant parents reported difficulties enrolling their children in school. In an interview with Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty's Migrant Media project, a Kyrgyz migrant woman mentioned that schools in the Moscow region, where she lives and works, refused to accept her two children in first and fourth grades.⁶⁰ In October 2024, Kyrgyz migrant parents petitioned the Kyrgyz government to develop an online education curriculum for their children in an attempt to address shortage of education opportunities for their children in Russia.⁶¹

Restrictive Regional Regulations

Following the Crocus City Hall attack, in moves that further stigmatize migrants, governors of at least 12 regions, enacted broad restrictions on migration in their own regions, including for example a prohibition on migrants being eligible for a large swathe of jobs. While states enjoy some discretion in regulating access to the job market for non-citizens and can justify some restrictions on economic or security grounds, the extraordinary scope of these bans are disproportionate and unjustified as necessary to pursue a legitimate aim and so violate international legal standards prohibiting discrimination.

For example, in Omsk region migrants are banned from working in education, healthcare, commerce, hunting, production of medicines and food products, and provision of social services.⁶²

In Samara oblast, migrants are barred from producing perishable bakery products, baby food and other food products, and from selling alcoholic beverages and tobacco products. They are not allowed to work in pharmacies and catering establishments or sell goods at open air markets, street stalls, and kiosks. They are also banned from driving taxis and public transportation and teaching in kindergartens, schools, colleges, and vocational

⁶⁰ "In Russia Migrants From Central Asia Cannot Enroll Children to Schools" ("В России мигранты из Центральной Азии не могут записать детей в школы"), Radio Ozodi – Tajik Service of Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty, August 21, 2024, <https://rus.ozodi.org/a/migranty-zhivuschie-v-rossii-ne-mogut-zapistatj-detey-v-shkoly-to-govoryat-cto-dokumenty-nepolnye-to-cto-mest-net> (accessed December 20, 2024).

⁶¹ "In Russia Schools Did Not Accept Our Children, So We Sent Them to Our Home Country: Migrants Appeal to Kyrgyz Authorities" ("В России детей не приняли в школу, мы их отправили на родину". Мигранты обратились к властям Кыргызстана"), Radio Azattyk – Kyrgyz Service of Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty, October 28, 2024, <https://rus.azattyk.org/a/33176068.html> (accessed December 20, 2024).

⁶² "In a Russian Region Migrants Will Be Banned From Working in Seven Spheres" ("В регионе России запретят работать мигрантам в семи сферах"), Lenta, October 15, 2024, <https://lenta.ru/news/2024/10/15/v-regione-rossii-zapretyat-rabotat-migrantam-v-semi-sferah> (accessed December 18, 2024).

schools.⁶³ The governor of Samara oblast justified this ban saying it was necessary to ensure the safety of citizens and protect the labor market in the region.⁶⁴

Similar bans and restrictions were introduced in Kaliningrad, Lipetsk, Novosibirsk, Kursk, and Voronej regions throughout 2024.⁶⁵

In Primorskiy Krai, from 2025 migrants are not allowed to work as taxi drivers or to drive trams and buses, except tourist buses. Also, they are not allowed to work in delivery services or organizations involved with logistics, public order and security, education, health care, and social services.⁶⁶

In the Moscow region, from 2025 migrants are barred from selling alcohol, tobacco, and street food, providing social services, and employment in the sports, culture, entertainment, health, and education spheres.⁶⁷ The governor of the Moscow region, Andrei Vorobiev, said: “there is economics on the one hand and then there are security issues on the other” [that were considered].⁶⁸

As justification for his ban on employment of migrants in public transportation, taxi companies, and gas and water companies, the governor of the Khabarovsk region, Dimitry Demeshin, said:

⁶³ “In Samara Migrants Banned From Working At Markets and Catering” (“В Самаре мигрантам запретили работать на рынках и в общепите”), Radio Ozodi, August 24, 2024, <https://rus.ozodi.org/a/33090915.html> (accessed December 18, 2024).

⁶⁴ Resolution No.564 of the Governor of Samara Region, “On Establishing Ban in 2025 to Employing Foreigners Working On Basis of Patents In Certain Areas of Economy,” December 29, 2024, https://pravo.samregion.ru/wp-content/uploads/sites/2/2025/01/2912_564.pdf (accessed January 25, 2025).

⁶⁵ “A Russian Region Banned Migrants From Working In Several Spheres. Which Jobs Will No Longer Employ Them?” (“Российский регион запретил мигрантам трудиться сразу в нескольких сферах. На какие работы их не возьмут?”), Lenta, October 15, 2024, <https://lenta.ru/news/2024/10/15/rossiyskiy-region-zapretil-migrantam-truditsya-srazu-v-neskolkih-sferah-na-kakie-raboty-ih-ne-vozmuto/> (accessed December 18, 2024).

⁶⁶ “Migrants in Primorie Banned From Working as Taxi Drivers and Couriers” (“Мигрантам в Приморье запретили работать таксистами и курьерами”), Interfax, December 23, 2024, <https://www.interfax-russia.ru/far-east/main/migrantam-v-primore-zapretil-rabotat-taksistami-i-kurerami> (accessed January 8, 2025).

⁶⁷ “In Moscow Oblast From 2025 Restrictions on Employment of Migrants” (“В Подмосковье с 2025 года вводят ограничения на работу мигрантов”), 24.KG, September 18, 2024, https://24.kg/obschestvo/305381_vpodmoskove_s2025_goda_vvodyat_ogranicheniya_narabotu_migrantov/ (accessed January 25, 2025).

⁶⁸ “Vorobiev Explained Restrictions on Employment of Migrants in Moscow Oblast” (“Воробьев объяснил ограничения на трудоустройство мигрантов в Подмосковье”), RBC, September 17, <https://www.rbc.ru/politics/17/09/2024/202466e999959a794721984c26a6> (accessed January 25, 2025).

I have repeatedly flagged the need for a robust response to the situation developing in the sphere of migration—both earlier, when I worked in the Prosecutor General’s Office, and this summer, when I was already appointed acting governor of Khabarovsk Krai. It is time to move to specific actions. The professions that fall under the ban imply constant contact with people and directly concern security issues. Therefore, we are introducing restrictions in these areas [of the labor market] on the virtually uncontrolled labor activity of foreigners in the region. Of course, we need to consider the interests of economic development, which will not “breathe” without additional human resources. But we will do this systematically, first of all, by relying on our own [non-migrant] work force that should have the priority right to occupy all the [employment] niches.

Altogether, migrants in at least 12 Russian regions have been banned from working in health care as doctors, nurses, and pharmacists; in education as teachers, university lecturers, and kindergarten teachers; in transport as public transport drivers, including taxis, locomotive crews, and pilots; in spheres related to state security as security guards and as employees in law enforcement agencies; in state and municipal institutions as administrators and state inspectors; in resource-related work in mining, timber trade, fishing, hunting, and wildlife breeding; and in office professions as translators, secretaries, editors, HR specialists, financiers, and accountants.⁶⁹

⁶⁹ “Which Professions Are Off Limits to Migrants in Russia?” (“В каких профессиях мигрантам нельзя работать в России?”), Asia Plus, October 22, 2024, <https://asiaplustj.info/ru/news/world/20241022/v-kakih-professiyah-migrantam-nelzya-rabotat-v-rossii> (accessed January 8, 2025).

III. Abuses Linked to the War in Ukraine

In September 2022, seven months after Russia’s full-scale invasion of Ukraine, its Parliament adopted a law that makes foreign nationals who serve in the Russian military for a year or more eligible for streamlined process to acquire Russian citizenship.⁷⁰

In addition, as the war in Ukraine continues into its fourth year, pro-government media and public figures have called for naturalized Russian citizens with Central Asian national origins to be mobilized into the army ahead of citizens of Russian ethnicity. International law prohibits states distinguishing between their own citizens based on ethnic or national origin.

Conversely, in August 2024, President Putin signed a law that allows the removal of citizenship from naturalized citizens for failure to register for military service, while law enforcement conducted mass raids throughout the year to force recruitment of recently naturalized citizens. By November 2024, at least 20 naturalized citizens originating from Central Asia had been stripped of their citizenship for refusing to join Russia’s armed forces.⁷¹ Although states enjoy the power to bestow and remove citizenship, deprivation of citizenship can only take place in limited circumstances. As a minimum it must be prescribed by law, be proportionate, that is, the least intrusive means of achieving a legitimate purpose, and be subject to due process; so, for example, it cannot be the result of arbitrary or discriminatory application of relevant laws or regulations. Deprivation of citizenship should also not lead to statelessness.

There are reports that people applying for Russian citizenship are required to sign military contracts before they can even submit their documents applying for citizenship. In late June 2024, the head of Russia’s chief investigative agency reported that nearly 30,000 new

⁷⁰ “Foreigners Serving As Contractors In the Russian Army Will Be Able to Receive Russian Citizenship In A Simplified Procedure” (“Иностранцы, служащие в российской армии по контракту, смогут получить гражданство РФ в упрощенном порядке”), Russian Duma news release, September 20, 2024, <http://duma.gov.ru/news/55276/> (accessed November 20, 2024).

⁷¹ “Your Passport Will Be Destroyed: Migrants Already Stripped of Russian Citizenship For Refusal to Fight In the War” (“Ваш паспорт будет уничтожен». Мигрантов начали лишать гражданства России за отказ воевать”), Radio Azattyk, November 8, 2024, <https://rus.azattyk.org/a/33194051.html> (accessed November 20, 2024).

Russian citizens of Central Asian descent had been registered for military service, 10,000 of whom had already deployed to the occupied territories.⁷²

An independent expert on migration flows between Central Asia and Russia, Yan Matusevich, told Human Rights Watch:

It is a carrot, stick, and deception system—the carrot is the migrant receives lots of money, the sign-up bonus is huge right now for citizens. If you're a non-citizen you get less, but it's still a lot, and then they fast-track citizenship for you and your family within a year. The stick is using the threat of deportation to coerce migrants into voluntary sign-ups. Then there's also a lot of deception—there were reports in the last year where migrants go to the Sakharovo migrant center⁷³ to get their work permit and go through medical exams where officials would slip in documents in tiny print in Russian and the migrants have to sign them and turns out they were a contract to serve with the Ministry of Defense.⁷⁴

Rakhat Sagynbek, who works for Insan-Leilek, also spoke of examples of Russian authorities blackmailing migrants with arbitrary detention and threat of deportation. She described a regular occurrence during police raids in which scores of migrants are detained, taken to a police station, held for several days, often without water or food, dragging out the process of their identification, and then pressured psychologically. She said:

[Police tell them:] “You've been working here for so many years, shame on you, protect us, give back to the country that has fed you for so long!” And they give them [the detained migrants] the ultimate choice of being deported or serving [in the armed forces]. Many refuse, of course, they hold out for a long time in detention with no communication with the outside world—while their relatives are going crazy, unsure of where they are.⁷⁵

⁷² “Bastrykin: 10 Thousand of Foreigners Who Received Russian Citizenship Were Caught and Sent to War” (“Бастрыкин: 10 тысяч получивших гражданство России иностранцев «отловили» и отправили на войну”), Mediazona, June 27, 2024, https://zona.media/news/2024/06/27/10_tysyach (accessed August 17, 2024).

⁷³ Sakharovo – a multifunctional migration documentation center outside Moscow, which also has a separate center for temporary detention of foreign individuals.

⁷⁴ Human Rights Watch online interview with Yan Matusevich, independent expert on migration, August 3, 2024.

⁷⁵ Human Rights Watch online interview with Rano Turayeva, migration expert at Insan Leilek, August 14, 2024.

Sagynbek also noted a significant increase in the number of complaints about cases of deception in forced military recruitment and labor exploitation in Russian-occupied Ukrainian territories:

The migrants were told they would work on building restoration or construction but would actually find themselves on the frontline or in the near vicinity, digging trenches, collecting corpses. Women who were told they'd be working as cleaners ended up in military units—cooking, cleaning, washing, etc.

She added that migrants often were afraid of leaving these sites because of the risk they might be on a “blacklist” at the border due to their previous violation of migration laws and not allowed to enter Russia. She said they also fear they will not be able to proceed to any other country from the border because being on the territory of the “Donetsk People’s Republic” or “Luhansk People’s Republic” could be considered a crime and lead to their imprisonment.

Another Kyrgyz lawyer, who asked to remain anonymous, confirmed⁷⁶:

There were cases of recruiters telling the prospective migrants about construction work assignments and that there would be very high salaries, but then they would take them to Mariupol and other occupied areas—and then they [labor migrants] would be sent to dig trenches at the frontline. And they would call us asking for help. And then, if the Ukrainian forces were advancing, the Russians would give them [migrant workers with construction contracts] firearms to protect the trenches. Our citizens were not told that they would be going to the occupied areas, they [the recruiters] would just tell them the salary would be very high—and they would only find out they are in Ukraine post-factum.

He also noted military recruiters have used numerous third-party Internet sites for recruiting, the ads presenting the work as restoration work or housing and maintenance work with salaries twice the usual:

⁷⁶ Human Rights Watch online interview [name withheld], November 7, 2024.

Definitely there have been case—front companies offering big salaries, private security companies etc.—and you end up working for the military, but you didn’t know in advance. They will say it’s the position of a cook and you end up cooking for soldiers on the frontline. From there, they are transitioning into the military.

Valentina Chupik, a migrant rights defender and director of “Tong Jahoni,” an NGO in Russia that provides legal aid to migrants from Central Asia, shared that war effort recruiters also work through migrant diaspora leaders to lure people to work or serve in the occupied areas. She relayed a story of a call she received in October 2022 from several Uzbek migrants asking her if Mariupol was in the Moscow region. They told her that their foreman, also a labor migrant, had found them a job within their work permit, which allowed them to work within the Moscow region. The foreman had told them the new job would provide them with living quarters and transportation to the site. However, when they arrived for pick up, men in military uniforms rounded them up and placed them roughly in buses with no responses to their questions:

They realized something was wrong when they were already in Ukraine when they saw the bombed-out villages. We were in touch with them for six hours, as they were being transported, then the connection was lost. There were several hundred of them, they said. They demanded to be released at one of the stops on the way. But the people in military uniforms and balaclavas with machine guns showed up and said that they would shoot, that they didn’t care where they [migrants] would be killed, right here or at the frontline.”⁷⁷

The government of Russia also has enlisted prisoners to serve in Ukraine. Russia’s Defense Ministry began this process in early 2023, taking over from the Wagner Group, a Russian mercenary group, which had started the practice in summer 2022. While this process was announced to be voluntary and open to citizens of all countries, some Central Asian migrants who were serving time in Russian prisons or had been released on parole told

⁷⁷ Human Rights Watch online interview with Valentina Chupik, migrants rights defender and director of “Tong Jahoni” NGO, August 14, 16, 17, 2024

reporters they had signed the contracts with the Defense Ministry under duress.⁷⁸

Valentina Chupik told Human Rights Watch:

There was a case from the city of Solovki back in October 2022. Six citizens of Uzbekistan were in prison for drugs. They had been detained at a construction site, and we believe the case against them was fabricated—and they were ordered [by the prison administration] to sign contracts with Wagner. When they refused, one was raped with a mop in front of the others. Then they were told that they had until the morning to decide. People were hysterical, they called us for help. From what I know, they all had to submit to this [sign the contracts].⁷⁹

Another lawyer helping Central Asian migrants in Russia said that one of his clients, a Kyrgyz national, went to a police station in Moscow to report to his parole officer and was allegedly tortured there by masked men in fatigues who wanted him to join the fighting in Ukraine:

People in camouflage and with their faces covered came in [to the room at the police station], beat him up, and forced him to sign a contract. He told me that they broke three fingers on his left hand and when he asked how he was supposed to be fighting the war with broken fingers, they replied, “You won’t need your hand there; you’ll go on a scouting mission.” He was in a very difficult situation because he could not just leave Russia, being on parole and all. In the end, his acquaintances hid him somewhere on Russia’s territory.⁸⁰

Once forcibly or voluntarily recruited, ex-prisoners are often deployed to the front lines with minimal training. Central Asian migrants who found themselves in this situation reported

⁷⁸ “Russia Pressures Central Asian Prisoners To Fight In Ukraine As ‘Expendable Force,’” Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty, October 18, 2024, <https://www.rferl.org/a/russia-central-asian-prisoners-war-ukraine-expendable/33162689.html> (accessed December 20, 2024).

⁷⁹ Human Rights Watch online interview with Valentina Chupik, August 16, 2024.

⁸⁰ Human Rights Watch online interview [name withheld], lawyer from “Tong Jahoni” NGO, October 10, 2024.

being treated as expendable and sent to the most dangerous combat zones.⁸¹ Injured soldiers claim if they get sick, they are sent back to the front line before full recovery.

Alibek (not his real name), 55-years-old, whose 24-year-old son, a migrant from the south of Kyrgyzstan, enlisted from a Russian prison in 2023, told Human Rights Watch that his son was wounded at the front and spent several days in hospital in a coma. “When he came around, he was sent back to the war although his head and arm were still bandaged. If you're alive and can shoot, it's enough for them to send you to the front line.”⁸²

According to Alibek, his son was finally discharged from the military in 2024 after he had sustained even more severe injuries, which left him incapacitated.

Alina (not her real name), whose brother, a migrant from Kyrgyzstan, was in prison in Russia and signed a contract with the Defense Ministry, told Human Rights Watch:

My brother realized from all the stories he heard from other Kyrgyz and Uzbek detainees from his unit that no one can leave the frontline, even if your supposed contract is over, unless you're dead or severely injured.

According to media, the Defense Ministry's significant push to expand prisoner recruitment has led to the closure of dozens of penal colonies in Russia. The human rights organization Russia Behind Bars reported that 53 prisons were closed in 2023 alone.⁸³

The military recruitment drive by Russia's Defense Ministry has also extended to pretrial detention facilities and immigration detention centers, which hold numerous migrant workers from Central Asian countries awaiting deportation. Conditions in these centers have been described as “inhuman and degrading”.⁸⁴

⁸¹ “Russia Pressures Central Asian Prisoners To Fight In Ukraine As 'Expendable Force',” RFE/RL, October 18, 2024, <https://www.rferl.org/a/russia-central-asian-prisoners-war-ukraine-expendable/33162689.html>, (accessed December 20, 2024).

⁸² Human Rights Watch online interview with Alibek A., father of a Kyrgyz migrant, October 8, 2024.

⁸³ “Russia Pressures Central Asian Prisoners To Fight In Ukraine As 'Expendable Force',” RFE/RL, October 18, 2024, <https://www.rferl.org/a/russia-central-asian-prisoners-war-ukraine-expendable/33162689.html> (accessed December 20, 2024).

⁸⁴ “Russian Special Institutions for the Temporary Detention of Foreign Nationals (SITDFN): inhuman and degrading conditions,” ADC Memorial, undated, https://adcmemorial.org/en/strategy_cases/russian-special-institutions-for-the-temporary-detention-of-foreign-nationals-sitdfn-inhuman-and-degrading-conditions/ (accessed February 18, 2025).

Abuses and Inhumane Treatment of Migrants at Sakharovo Detention Center

The Sakharovo Center, located on the outskirts of Moscow, houses both a service center for migrants, where they can file applications for work permits and receive other administrative support, and a detention facility for migrants facing deportation. Human rights defenders working on migration issues recently identified the Sakharovo Center as a center of forced recruitment of Central Asian migrants for Russia's war in Ukraine.⁸⁵

Media reports and Human Rights Watch's interviews with experts and migrants indicate that migrants detained at the Sakharovo Center face a range of human rights violations, including physical and verbal abuse.

Dilshod, a 42-year-old migrant from Uzbekistan, told Human Rights Watch:

The most common words that the guards and the police use to address us are *suka [bitch]* or *churka* [racist slur used in relation to persons of non-Slavic appearance]. Actually, these are the most normal words you get to hear, everything else I cannot even tell you [referring to Human Rights Watch researcher], you're a woman, you shouldn't hear such language. It's humiliating and degrading what they say to us.⁸⁶

The detention facility houses migrants in cramped prison-like cells with up to 10 people per room. The food provided to the detainees is scarce and of poor quality. One 35-year-old Tajik migrant who had been detained there reported:

The beds [at Sakharovo detention center] are made of iron sheets welded together. A normal person won't last there for long.... There are 20 centimeters of space between each bar; the mattresses can't

⁸⁵ "Sakharovo Center Was Turned Into a Hotbed of War Recruitment: Migrants Appeal For Protection of Their Rights" ("«Центр «Сахарово» превратили в очаг привлечения на войну». Мигранты призвали защитить их права"), Radio Azattyk, June 17, 2024, <https://rus.azattyk.org/a/3299542.html> (accessed December 13, 2024).

⁸⁶ Human Rights Watch online interview with Dilshod, migrant from Uzbekistan, October 17, 2024.

withstand it. People come out of there with bruises because they sleep on iron bars. Those who drag the mattresses to the floor to sleep there get beaten by the guards. The food is just porridge and 20 grams of sugar for two people [one portion split for the whole day].⁸⁷

Detainees at Sakharovo, including women, also suffer harassment and physical abuse and do not receive adequate medical assistance. A Kyrgyz migrant woman and former Sakharovo detainee Baktygul Moldobaeva, said in a public video posted on Facebook:

We had such hard times in Sakharovo. We slept on iron beds. I saw with my own eyes how they [guards] beat the guys [men] with electric shockers. They also abused girls [young women]. They said [trying to coerce them]: "Will you be my temporary wife?" There were pregnant women there, one was six months pregnant. They don't even pay attention to their health. There are citizens of Kyrgyzstan who have been there from 20 days to three or four months. There are two women who are there because they don't have documents. They need help. There were days when they treated us in a way they wouldn't treat even dogs. I wouldn't wish that on my worst enemy.⁸⁸

Migrants and lawyers who provide assistance to detained migrants described to Human Rights Watch how detainees at Sakharovo Center were tortured with electric shocks, beaten with batons, and otherwise physically ill-treated.⁸⁹

Shokhrukh, a 33-year-old migrant from Uzbekistan, recounted:

I saw how they beat up this 19-year-old Tajik boy.... His registration [for temporary residence] expired, he was detained [by police] and brought to Sakharovo. He did not understand what was being said to him, he

⁸⁷ Human Rights Watch online interview with Shukhrat, migrant from Tajikistan, October 21, 2024.

⁸⁸ "Story of Kyrgyz Woman About Her Stay in Migration Center" ("Рассказ кыргызстанки о нахождении в миграционном центре"), Current Time Asia, June 25, 2024, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=XennMoLen8k> (accessed October 18, 2024).

⁸⁹ Human Rights Watch online interview [name withheld], lawyer from "Tong Jahoni" NGO, October 10, 2024.

did not speak any Russian. They told him to raise his hands; he did not understand. When someone [another detainee] tried to translate, they [the guards] told him, “Shut up, you bitch!” They beat him [the young man] so much that he cried, he screamed. I felt so sorry for him. He was beaten because he did not understand Russian, that's all. Instead of providing an interpreter or using volunteers, they beat him. This is racism. Nazism. Fascism.⁹⁰

Azamat, a 39-year-old Kyrgyz migrant, who was interviewed when he had just returned to Kyrgyzstan following his prolonged detention at Sakharovo Center, told Human Rights Watch:

There was a case the day before yesterday—a man was feeling unwell at the detention center, so we asked them [the guards] to call a doctor—and they said he would be deported even if he dies, so who cares. They didn't call a doctor; I don't know what happened to that guy... The [guards] also hit me with a stun gun three times when I tried to intervene on his behalf, once between my legs.⁹¹

There are numerous reports of guards at the Sakharovo Center abusing detainees to instill fear. Migrants also told Human Rights Watch that they believe that guards subjected the detainees to cruel and degrading treatment with a view to deterring them from returning to Russia. The abuse included, among other things, the forced shaving of beards and mockery of religious practices of the detainees.

Shokhrukh said in a media interview:

On the day we arrived there [to Sakharovo], they [guards] intimidated us, made us walk in a single file, run, take off our clothes. Then, they examined us and beat us with stun guns. They gave us food with pork [which Muslims cannot eat]. Since we were hungry, we removed the

⁹⁰ Human Rights Watch online interview with Shohkurh, migrant from Uzbekistan, November 2, 2024.

⁹¹ Human Rights Watch online interview with Azamat, migrant from Kyrgyzstan, October 28, 2024.

meat and ate the rest. There were guys among us who prayed. When one guy was praying, the guards came in. Then, one of them hit him in the face a couple of times. Still, the guy continued to pray. We told them he was praying. “Let him go to Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, Uzbekistan and pray there,” they said.⁹²

Migrants also reported having their personal belongings and money confiscated without return. Abdusattor, 34-year-old migrant from Tajikistan told Human Rights Watch:

At Sakharovo, there are no people, they keep [us like] animals there. We are like animals to them and that's why they behave this way towards us. I don't remember how much money exactly I had on me, but they took everything and didn't return it. They didn't even write down anywhere that I had money. When they make an inventory of the property that is being confiscated, you have to write everything down, write it yourself. But they don't even let you write it all down. They go like, “sign it quickly, come on, bitch, come on!” And it's impossible to record everything.⁹³

The situation of migrant detainees at Sakharovo Center is further complicated by the apparent lack of effective oversight or response to complaints. When former detainees attempt to report these abuses to their home country's embassy they often face skepticism or requests for evidence that is impossible to obtain given the controlled environment of the detention center.

Russia's failure to respond to and to prevent such treatment of migrant detainees contravenes Russia's human rights obligations in particular the absolute prohibition on torture or other cruel, inhuman, or degrading treatment or punishment which is

⁹² “Sakharovo Center Was Turned Into a Hotbed of War Recruitment: Migrants Appeal For Protection of Their Rights” (“«Центр «Сахарово» превратили в очаг привлечения на войну». Мигранты призвали защитить их права”), Radio Azattyk, June 17, 2024, <https://rus.azattyk.org/a/32995492.html> (accessed December 13, 2024).

⁹³ Human Rights Watch online interview with Abdusattor, migrant from Tajikistan, November 5, 2024.

binding on Russia both as a matter of customary international law and treaty law. Russia also routinely fails to respect its obligation as spelled out in the Vienna Convention on Consular Relations of 1963, to inform any foreign national detained by its law enforcement of their right to seek consular assistance and notify the consulate without delay. Consular officers have a right to visit their detained nationals in custody, communicate with them, and arrange legal representation.⁹⁴

⁹⁴ Vienna Convention on Consular Relations: https://legal.un.org/ilc/texts/instruments/english/conventions/9_2_1963.pdf (accessed February 19, 2025).

IV. Physical Violence and Property Damage

Xenophobic violence against Central Asian migrants has long been a major area of concern, one heightened following Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine in 2022 and again since the March 2024 Crocus City Hall attack.⁹⁵

According to the Nazi Video Monitoring Project (NVMP), an independent research organization that monitors xenophobic violence in Russia, there has been a notable increase in documented attacks against Central Asian migrants in Russia from late 2022 onwards by members of various far-right movements, including violent neo-Nazi groups, and vigilante groups such as the "Northern Man" and "Russian Community."⁹⁶

SOVA research center, a Russian NGO focused on nationalism and xenophobia, recorded 232 cases in Russia of serious injury resulting from hate-motivated attacks in the first 10 months of 2024 compared to 119 cases for the whole of 2023.⁹⁷ These cases are not specific to Central Asians, but show an overall increase in the number of graver hate-motivated attacks that lead to serious injury. Many victims have been from Central Asia.

Human Rights Watch spoke with Suhrob S., 30-year-old migrant from Tajikistan about a night when he was physically attacked leaving the construction site he was working at in June 2024. As he was leaving the site late at night, with most of the other workers already gone, a group of youngsters came up behind him, kicked him in the back and left him lying on the ground.

I don't know what I did to them; it was so unexpected. I didn't even hear them because I was thinking about something. I just felt a kick in my back, laughter, and then I was on the ground. They didn't beat me further; they just ran away. They didn't even say anything.

⁹⁵ Nazi Video Monitoring Project, "How Neo-Nazi Violence Was Reborn in Russia With the War," November 3, 2024, <https://nvmpproject.com/news/nazi-war-background> (accessed December 2, 2025).

⁹⁶ Human Rights Watch online interview with NVMP researcher [name withheld], August 27, 2024.

⁹⁷ Sova Research Center, "Russian Nationalism and Xenophobia in October 2024," November 11, 2024, <https://www.sova-center.ru/en/xenophobia/news-releases/2024/11/d47096> (accessed December 4, 2024). <https://rus.azattyk.org/a/3299542.html>.

Another migrant, Askar A., 27-years-old from Kyrgyzstan, who was working as a courier in Ekaterinburg in 2024, described how the fear of being attacked if identified as Central Asian is so pervasive that they are always wary of groups, particularly young men, coming close:

I was on my bike, stopped on the sidewalk to adjust the delivery sack...— and suddenly I see with my peripheral vision three young men walking in my direction.... There was something [nasty] about how they were staring directly at me. Something was just so off. I quickly managed to get back on my bike just in time because they had already come so close, and one was fumbling with something in his pocket. I've heard of such attacks on the street, and I just pushed hard on the pedals and took off. Heard them yelling something but my heart was racing I didn't hear clearly....

According to analysis of xenophobic violence in Russia for 2024 by the NVMP, social media and messaging apps have played a crucial role in this resurgence.⁹⁸ New channels mixing xenophobic news coverage, racist commentary, and glorified accounts of past neo-Nazi activities have proliferated, recruiting new members, celebrating violent attacks, and creating a feedback loop that encourages further attacks.

Human Rights Watch received access to the NVMP's database of more than 1,400 videos of hate-motivated physical attacks downloaded from various Telegram channels maintained by xenophobic and neo-Nazi groups. In the database the videos were categorized by the type of victims, type of attack, place of attack (where geolocation was possible), date of publication, and channel of publication. While Human Rights Watch could not independently confirm the dates of the attacks, the date of publication of the videos by the xenophobic and neo-Nazi groups on Telegram corresponds to the uptick of violence against Central Asian migrants and contributing to an environment of fear for the migrants.

The victims were tagged by the NVMP's analytical team as Central Asians, alcohol and drug users, migrants, people from the Caucasus, Roma people, non-Russians, Asians, Muslims, Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender, Intersex, and Queer (LGBTIQ), homeless people, couriers, street cleaners, antifa, children, regular citizens, and non-conformists. Each of the

⁹⁸ Nazi Video Monitoring Project, "How Neo-Nazi Violence Was Reborn in Russia With the War," November 3, 2024, <https://nvmpproject.com/news/nazi-war-background> (accessed December 2, 2025).

1,400 videos also had a description of what can be seen, as well as the original text that accompanied these videos when posted on the Telegram channels. Of these 426 were clearly tagged as targeting Central Asians and migrants, with incidents ranging from coordinated physical assaults to property damage.

Human Rights Watch reviewed database description of all the 426 cases tagged as involving Central Asians and migrants, and some of the videos where the victim was tagged as ‘Muslim,’ as well as ‘street cleaner’, or ‘courier’ as these are the most common jobs for Central Asian migrants to do. Of these Human Rights Watch selected 17 videos for detailed analysis, the findings of which are presented below. The selection of 17 cases was made based on when they were published—we focused on cases from 2024—and on the clarity of the motives for the attacks.

Documented incidents range from coordinated physical assaults to targeted property damage. Physical attacks often began with the use of incapacitating substances like pepper spray, followed by group assault.

The reviewed incidents spanned from February to October 2024, predominantly occurring in urban environments. The attacks mostly took place in public parks (5 out of 17), residential courtyards (11 out of 17), on streets (11 out of 17), suggesting deliberate targeting of areas where Central Asian migrants are likely to be isolated or vulnerable, particularly at night.

The perpetrators of violence in the 17 videos primarily targeted male adults with a particular focus on individuals engaged in construction, maintenance, and service sector work which are associated with migrant labor. The attackers appear to have identified the victims based on their visible ethnic markers or by directly asking what their nationality was or demanding their identity documents. In some cases, the attackers targeted people in work uniforms.

The videos posted appear to have been designed for viewer entertainment and to spread hate against Central Asians. They are often peppered with popular cultural references, feature music and subtitles, and typically include the taunting and attempted humiliation of victims.

For example, in a video posted to Telegram in March 2024, a man whom the video’s caption alleges to be Tajik, is assaulted by three attackers, who pepper spray him and begin beating

him. The caption describing the video claims the victim was hit on the back of the head with a hammer, although it is impossible to verify this due to the low resolution of the video. The caption also uses taunting language with snide references to popular Soviet slogans about “friendship of the [Soviet] peoples.”

In three videos showing attacks on an individual and two groups of men who appear to be Central Asians, respectively, the video captions make specific reference to the Crocus City Hall attack, marking the attack as retribution for what transpired on March 22, 2024. The text posted with one of the videos says: “We won’t forget, we won’t forgive” and another: “This is for all Russians!”

One of the few documented attacks on women took place in March 2024. In a video posted on social media the person filming comes up to a group of at least four women and is heard asking for directions, then is seen spraying a liquid into the face of one of the women. The women then run away and the caption to the video reads, “Evening entertainment, for Aryans only.”

Typically, the perpetrators attacked in groups ranging from two to 10 individuals, dressed in clothing that can align with far-right movements: military-style attire, combat boots with white laces, bomber jackets.

For example, in a video posted to Telegram in February 2024, approximately 10 assailants approach what appears to be a group of Central Asians. As one of the victims falls into the snow, they kick and punch him until he is barely moving. Then, one of the attackers beats him with an object that resembles a whip. At least one apparent migrant is filmed running away, with some of the attackers chasing after him. The video then shows attackers repeating the assault against others who appear to be of Central Asian origin.

The groups have also used entrapment as a method of luring men into set-up dates with women or girls and sometimes men or boys. In some cases, the attackers then claim that the “bait” was under 18 years of age, a common tactic of xenophobic far-right groups to paint migrants as rapists and pedophiles.⁹⁹

⁹⁹ Mattias Ekman, “Anti-immigrant Sentiments and Mobilization on the Internet,” in: SAGE Handbook of Media and Migration, eds. Smets K, Leurs K, Georgiou M, et al., (London: SAGE, 2019).

In a video posted to Telegram in May 2024, at least 10 people surround a man sitting on the ground with his hands folded in front of him. Human Rights Watch was not able to independently verify the location. At least seven members of the group proceed to kick him, still on the ground. The video then cuts to the picture of his bloodied face, blurred. The assailants then appear to examine his passport and other identity documents. The video's description identifies the man as Uzbek. The attackers are heard saying they attacked him because he was harassing their female friend on the Russian social media platform VKontakte.

In a video posted to Telegram in July 2024, three men are seen interrogating a person crouching on the ground, asking him why he came to meet a 15-year-old girl. It then shows three men in balaclavas punching, kicking and dragging him on the ground, while he screams for help. In the description the victim is called "Masturbek," a derisive slur combining the word "masturbation" with a traditional Central Asian male name suffix.

The videos also show destruction of property, largely focused on migrant worker accommodations and vehicles with Central Asian license plates or stickers with flags or names of these countries, suggesting a strategy of both personal and community intimidation. There are also some videos with far-right youth slashing tires of vehicles apparently belonging to Kyrgyz, Uzbek, and Tajik nationals.

Although most of the cases in all of the NVMP's database involve smaller scale violence, some exhibit severe violence, including with the use of hand-held weapons such as flare guns, hammers, and bats, and, in one case, a Molotov cocktail.

A video posted in August 2024 shows a small house at night. Then it cuts to a masked man lighting a Molotov cocktail and throwing it at the house, followed by an explosion and flames. The description text claims that there were people inside the house and that they were migrants.

Many perpetrators appear to have systematically documented their attacks with the goal of recording them to distribute them via social media, mainly through Telegram channels. Descriptive text accompanying the videos suggest an element of propaganda to their actions—e.g., trumpeting the victim's ethnicity and appealing to Russian national pride—

with the apparent aim of recruiting more members from within sympathetic audiences or inciting more xenophobic violence.

Although Russia has a law banning “incitement of interethnic hate,” experts note that it is rarely applied in connection with xenophobic violence and even fewer cases make it to trial. Yan Matusevich, an independent migration expert, told Human Rights Watch:

[M]ost cases of xenophobic violence have been prosecuted under “hooliganism,” and a lot of lawyers have complained about that, because hooliganism is merely about violent acts disturbing public order.¹⁰⁰

In addition to the glorification of xenophobic physical violence against individual migrants from Central Asia perpetrated by ultra-right groups, there has also been a rise in vigilante activism in the past two years.

In the early days of Russia’s invasion of Ukraine, vigilante nationalist groups vocally supported the Kremlin’s war, which seems to have significantly expanded their access to economic and political resources.¹⁰¹ Although it is difficult to ascertain whether the Russian government directly supports any of these groups, news reports in 2023 and 2024 show members of such groups actively participating in official law enforcement raids or taking on militia roles and organizing smaller informal raids on migrants’ places of work and residence.¹⁰²

Alexander Verkhovsky, director of the SOVA research center, told Human Rights Watch:

There are volunteer helpers of the police called *drujinniki*; there are quite a lot of them recently, and they have this vigilante vibe. Of course, that is nothing new, they were there before too, but now this movement is more

¹⁰⁰ Human Rights Watch online interview with Yan Matusevich, independent expert on migration, August 3, 2024.

¹⁰¹ Nazi Video Monitoring Project, “How Neo-Nazi Violence Was Reborn in Russia With the War,” November 3, 2024, <https://nvmpproject.com/news/nazi-war-background>, (accessed December 2, 2025).

¹⁰² Vladimir Rozanskij, “Pro-government, Russian Nationalist Network On the Hunt for Migrants,” Asia News, December 8, 2024, <https://www.asianews.it/news-en/Pro-government%2C-Russian-nationalist-network-on-the-hunt-for-migrants-61313.html>, (accessed January 8, 2025).

massive, and because they are on the side of the government, politically loyal to the regime, they are allowed to act freely.¹⁰³

Nationalist and Vigilante Groups in Russia

In recent years, nationalist groups like Severnyy Chelovek (Northern Man)¹⁰⁴ and Russkaya Obshchina (Russian Community)¹⁰⁵ have been increasingly active, often collaborating with law enforcement in anti-migrant operations. These groups present themselves as defenders of "traditional values" and the so-called "Russian world." They frequently participate in police raids targeting migrant workers, especially from Central Asia, under the guise of maintaining public order through controlling illegal migration,¹⁰⁶ and have alleged that migrants are prone to perpetrating crimes.¹⁰⁷

Emphasis on concepts of "security" for the majority ethnicity and "protection from criminal elements" are common euphemistic language masking vigilante activity that these two organizations engage in.¹⁰⁸

Both groups, in cooperation with other smaller groups, have targeted Central Asian migrants through xenophobic campaigns since their establishment.¹⁰⁹ These activities have ranged from propaganda with open and covert messaging aimed at migrants to

¹⁰³ Human rights Watch online interview with Alexander Verkhovsky, director of SOVA research center, August 12, 2024.

¹⁰⁴ Severnyy Chelovek (Northern Man) official Vkontake page, <https://vk.com/sevchelrussia1313>, (accessed December 17, 2024).

¹⁰⁵ Russkaya Obshchina (Russian Community) official Vkontakte page, https://vk.com/obshina_rus?from=search, (accessed December 17, 2024).

¹⁰⁶ Aiganysh Aidarbekova, "Far-Right, Xenophobic Movements Incite Anti-Migrant Raids in Russia," Bellingcat, December 15, 2023, <https://www.bellingcat.com/news/2023/12/15/the-far-right-xenophobic-movements-inciting-russias-anti-migrant-raids/>, (accessed December 17, 2024).

¹⁰⁷ ADC Memorial, "Second Year of War: Persecution of Migrants in Russian in 2023," December 18, 2023, <https://adcmemorial.org/en/articles/the-second-year-of-war-persecution-of-migrants-in-russia-in-2023/>, (accessed December 18, 2024).

¹⁰⁸ Miroslav Mares and Tore Bjorgo, "Concepts and Goals of Current Research," *Vigilantism Against Migrants and Minorities*, eds Mares and Bjorgo, (London:Routledge, 2019), <https://www.duo.uio.no/bitstream/handle/10852/71604/Mares+and+Bjorgo+-+Vigilantism+against+Migrants+and+Minorities+-+Concepts+and+goals+of+current+research.pdf?sequence=2>, (accessed December 18, 2024).

¹⁰⁹ "We Are Russians and God Is With Us: How The New Ultra-Right Appeared In Russia And How Are They Different From The Old Ones" ("«Мы русские, с нами Бог». Как в России появились новые ультраправые и чем они отличаются от старых"), BBC Russian Service, June 7, 2024, <https://www.bbc.com/russian/articles/cxrdd7xo3530>, (accessed December 20, 2024).

direct actions, such as patrolling neighborhoods with high migrant concentrations and collaborating with local authorities in abusive raids.

As an example of the first, in 2023 a smaller group called Obyknovenny Tsarizm (Ordinary tsarism) developed a list of 10 commandments for incoming migrants, which contain implicit racist stereotyping.¹¹⁰ One of them reads:

Russia is a secular state. The majority of the population here does not follow norms of Islam. Pork is sold in stores, the law does not obligate anyone to be dressed according to the Islamic dress code. A dog is not a dirty animal, it is a pet. Deal with it. P.S. By the way, farm animals in Russia are exclusively used for food.¹¹¹

Bellingcat, an investigative journalism outlet based in the Netherlands, researched large-scale anti-migrant raids by Russian police in 2023, a campaign known as “Nelegal-2023.” Many raids were instigated by members of various vigilante groups like Severnyy Chelovek and Russkaya Obshchina, as well as members of smaller far-right groups, who alerted law enforcement of places their members had noted groups of labor migrants gather and then joined in the raids.¹¹² Members of these groups filmed the detentions of migrants and shared the videos with their followers on social media platforms.

For example, in January 2024, members of Severnyy Chelovek and Russkaya Obshchina participated in a large-scale anti-migrant raid at a construction site in Yekaterinburg, alongside law enforcement. Of the 150 people that were rounded up in the raid, only eight were found to have violated migration legislation. Four others were handed draft

¹¹⁰ “Memos For Migrants,” publication by “Obyknovenny tsarism” far-right group, July 2023, https://vk.com/search?q=%D0%BF%D0%B0%D0%BC%D1%8F%D1%82%D0%BA%D0%B0%20%D0%B4%D0%BB%D1%8F%20%D0%BC%D0%B8%D0%B3%D1%80%D0%B0%D0%BD%D1%82%D0%B0&z=video-198094764_456240709, (accessed December 19, 2024).

¹¹¹ “Memos For Migrants,” publication by “Obyknovenny tsarism,” July 2023, https://avatars.dzeninfra.ru/get-zen_doc/10122231/pub_64ca0321d49dc96foc8a8615_64ca054f1ecod62c86ab41do/scale_2400, (accessed December 18, 2024).

¹¹² Aiganysh Aidarbekova, “Far-Right, Xenophobic Movements Incite Anti-Migrant Raids in Russia,” Bellingcat, December 15, 2023: <https://www.bellingcat.com/news/2023/12/15/the-far-right-xenophobic-movements-inciting-russias-anti-migrant-raids/> (accessed December 17, 2024).

summons. The detained migrant workers reported being subjected to verbal abuse and physical intimidation, being forced to crawl in single file.¹¹³ Later local members of Russian Community posted the video of the operation on their Telegram channel, which caused an international outcry, with the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Kyrgyzstan issuing a note of protest and describing the raid as “humiliating the dignity” of the migrants.¹¹⁴

In August 2024, members of Russian Community in Yekaterinburg participated in a raid together with police and representatives of the local military commissariat (*voenkomat*) against migrants who were selling fruits and vegetables. Police detained nine fruit sellers for trading without authorization.¹¹⁵ As they were led away and others fled, members of the vigilante group told the buyers and passersby that they should take whatever they wanted from the migrants’ stalls free of charge since they were selling the goods “illegally.” None of the fruit sellers was compensated for their losses that day.

In September 2024, a vigilante group, in consultation with local authorities and police, launched a chat-bot for residents to report complaints about migrants in New Moscow, an administrative territory outside the city of Moscow.¹¹⁶ The bot has already led to 42 police raids. As a result, police brought administrative charges against 100 migrants and deported 32 others. Similar chat-bots were created in other parts of the country in 2024.¹¹⁷

¹¹³ “In Yekaterinburg Police Forced Migrants To Crawl In Single File During Raid. Four Received Military Draft Notices. Video, Photo” (“В Екатеринбурге силовики заставили мигрантов ходить «гуськом» во время рейда. Четверым вручили повестки в военкомат. Видео, фото”), Central Asia Media, January 20, 2024, <https://centralasia.media/news:2053912>, (accessed December 18, 2024).

¹¹⁴ “Forced To Crawl In Single File, Some Forced To Kneel: Anti-Migrant Raid in Yekaterinburg and Reaction of Kyrgyz Authorities” (“«Заставили ползти гуськом, некоторых поставили на колени». Рейд против мигрантов в Екатеринбурге и реакция властей КР”), Radio Azattyk, January 22, 2024, <https://rus.azattyk.org/a/32786410.html>, (accessed December 18, 2024).

¹¹⁵ “In Yekaterinburg Migrants Selling Fruits And Vegetables Detained. Vigilantes from Russkaya Obschina Allowed Bypassers To Take Their Produce For Free” (“В Екатеринбурге задержали торговавших фруктами и овощами мигрантов. «Дружинники» из «Русской общины» разрешили прохожим забирать их товар»), Current Time, August 8, 2024, <https://www.currenttime.tv/a/rossiya-reyd-migranty/33070645.html>, (accessed December 19, 2024).

¹¹⁶ “In New Moscow A Bot For Reporting Migrants Was Created” (“В Новой Москве создали бот для доносов на мигрантов”), Current Time, September 5, 2024, <https://www.currenttime.tv/a/rossiya-bot-migranty-donosy/33108362.html>, (accessed December 19, 2024); for example, users may report about apartments where they believe migrants might be residing.

¹¹⁷ “Why Is The Russian World So Afraid of a Worker From Central Asia?” (“Почему русский мир так боится шуткатура из Средней Азии?”), Chita.RU, January 5, 2025, <https://www.chita.ru/text/society/2025/01/05/74957795/>, (accessed January 10, 2025).

Although these groups claim to be independent of the government and not to work in coordination with one another, according to media and bloggers, Russian Community may be a government project aimed at keeping nationalist movements under control.¹¹⁸

In an interview with the BBC in June 2024, Vera Alperovich, an expert at the SOVA Center, noted it was possible that the real purpose of both Russian Community and Northern Man projects could be to channel people with nationalist sentiment into controlled ideological frameworks and prevent them from developing an anti-government agenda.¹¹⁹

In 2023, the UN Committee on the Elimination of Racial Discrimination (CERD), the official body tasked with interpreting the International Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Racial Discrimination, expressed concerns to Russia over “the spread of hate crime and racist hate speech, and the dissemination of negative stereotypes, against ... migrants, particularly those from Central Asia and the Caucasus, including on State-owned radio and television networks.”¹²⁰ The Committee called on Russia to firmly condemn and strengthen its efforts to combat spread of racist hate speech and to investigate and adequately punish incidents of hate crime and hate speech against migrants in Russia, among others.¹²¹

¹¹⁸ “Russkaya Obschina: Organization of Pro-government Nationalist Groups Gaining Popularity In Russia” (“Русская община”: как устроены провластные группы националистов, набирающие популярность в России), Current Time, August 9, 2024, <https://www.currenttime.tv/a/russkaya-obschina-kak-ustroyeny-provlastnye-gruppy-natsionalistov-nabirayuschie-populyarnost-v-rossii/33071674.html>, (accessed December 19, 2024);

“Russkaya Obschina: What’s Their Use to Putin?” (“Русская община. Зачем они нужны Путину?”), Navalny Live, November 12, 2024, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=vY2WB7Qr4e4>, (accessed December 19, 2024).

¹¹⁹ “We Are Russians and God Is With Us: How The New Ultra-Right Appeared In Russia And How Are They Different From The Old Ones” (“«Мы русские, с нами Бог». Как в России появились новые ультраправые и чем они отличаются от старых”), BBC Russian Service, June 7, 2024, <https://www.bbc.com/russian/articles/cxrrd7x03530>, (accessed December 20, 2024).

¹²⁰ UN Committee of the Convention on Elimination of Racial Discrimination, Concluding Observations on the combined twenty-fifth and twenty-sixth periodic reports of the Russian Federation, CERD/C/RUS/CO/25-26, June 1, 2023, <https://digitallibrary.un.org/record/4012481?v=pdf>, (accessed December 10, 2024).

¹²¹ Ibid

V. Administrative Harassment and Discrimination

The existing migration system in Russia is increasingly punitive, penalizing even minor administrative infractions, with police officers as its main enforcers.

Khurshed, a 24-year-old labor migrant from Tajikistan told Human Rights Watch:

How do ordinary Russians treat us? Conflicts with ordinary people [happen]—they called us *churkas*—but these are minor conflicts, they can be resolved. With police, it's different. I was detained this one time. I asked, "What's wrong officer, did I break a law or something?" And he said "Shut up, *churka*, this is my country, you are a stranger here, you do not exist here, I will do with you as I see fit."¹²²

Khurshed also pointed out that when police have randomly stopped him and he has had a problem understanding their questions, the officers have raised their voices and used offensive language, including racist slurs.

Another migrant from Tajikistan, Daler, 34, said:

When police officers see an Asian-looking person, especially a Tajik person, they start creating problems, even if your documents are alright, you have everything, the patent [work permit], all is there. It does not matter to them if you're a law-abiding person. What matters is that you're Asian and that's it.¹²³

Over the past 15 years, the Russian state has introduced more grounds for deportation or expulsion or entry bans, including for minor infractions like traffic fines or jaywalking and for one-off administrative violations like failure to register in the seven days' time required by migration law, which previously would barely have resulted in a fine.

¹²² Human Rights Watch online interview with Khurshed, migrant from Tajikistan, November 7, 2024.

¹²³ Human Rights Watch online interview with Daler, migrant from Tajikistan, November 7, 2024.

Jamoliddin, a 40-year-old migrant from Tajikistan, described what happened when he needed to urgently return home because of a family emergency:

They [border police] took me off the flight because I had not registered myself [for temporary residence with the police] in the required time and locked me up in the temporary detention center for migrants. I was kept there for 18 days before getting deported from Russia [to Tajikistan] with a 5-year entry ban.¹²⁴

Following the Crocus City Hall attack, punitive expulsions, arrests, and administrative detentions have become an everyday reality for migrants:

Many migrants keep silent. If there is increased attention, they are afraid the police will dig deeper and interrogate the migrant, they will definitely find something to deport them for. Therefore, they are reluctant to go to public spaces where they can express their concerns. Even at our zoom meetings for migrants, they ask not to record, not to talk about the war in Ukraine, about the crisis in migration policy.¹²⁵

Transgender labor migrants from Central Asia are easy targets for harassment because databases maintained by the border guards, the police, and the migration authorities often include a migrant's identification data reflecting their legal gender, which is typically the sex they were assigned at birth and not the gender they live in and outwardly express.

A small scale academic study conducted in 2024 on experiences of transgender migrants from Central Asia and the South Caucasus, based on interviews with 17 respondents, recorded that misalignment between gender expression and gender as listed on identification documents has exposed trans migrants to a range of negative experiences with border guards, including misgendering, invasive and humiliating questions, and demands to undress and “prove” their gender.¹²⁶

¹²⁴ Human Rights Watch online interview with Jamoliddin, migrant from Tajikistan, October 30, 2024.

¹²⁵ Human Rights Watch online interview with Rakhat Sagynbek, Insan-Leilek, August 20, 2024.

¹²⁶ Yana Kirey-Sitnikova, “Experiences of Transgender Migrants From Kyrgyzstan, Kazakhstan, Tajikistan, Armenia, and Uzbekistan Living in Russia,” *Migration Studies*, Volume 12, Issue 4, December 2024, <https://doi.org/10.1093/migration/mnae038>, (accessed January 29, 2025).

Khurshedjon, a 32-year-old transgender man from Tajikistan, told Human Rights Watch:

They [border guards] stopped me because my previous ID popped up [in their database]. They asked me several questions, took photos of me and the place of my [chest] surgery. I closed my face with my hands, so they would not have it in the photo. They detained me [for several hours], took some analyses.¹²⁷

Alina, a 25-year-old transgender woman from Kyrgyzstan, said:

I'm just not in a position to go to the Sakharovo Center to get my documents sorted: I don't look the way I do on my ID, and I just can't deal with the extra questioning, the looks from not just the administrators, but everyone there. So, I just bribe one of their employees [to process documents].... Money buys me peace.¹²⁸

Experts and migrants reported that although border authorities have for many years conducted extra checks of incoming Central Asians, since the Crocus City Hall attack, they have adopted further invasive practices such as searching phones and other belongings of migrants during random stop-and-checks or at the border crossing points.

Alexander Verkhovsky of SOVA Center says that the practice of scouring the phones of migrants increased significantly after the Crocus City Hall attack:

When the police stop them [apparent migrants from Central Asia] for routine checks, they dig through their phones, look at what chats they are in, go through their messages on WhatsApp, Telegram and Facebook.... That is why migrants have started leaving chats and deleting correspondence.... This started happening on a massive scale after the terrorist attack. Prior to that, those checks weren't [as common].¹²⁹

¹²⁷ Human Rights Watch online interview with Khurshedjon, transgender migrant from Tajikistan, November 14, 2024.

¹²⁸ Human Rights Watch online interview with Alina, transgender migrant from Kyrgyzstan, November 15, 2024.

¹²⁹ Human Rights Watch online interview with Alexander Verkhovsky, director of SOVA research center, August 12, 2024.

Bakyt, a 27-year-old migrant from Kyrgyzstan, told Human Rights Watch:

After Crocus, there were no changes at work, but huge changes in public places. It's just the most usual thing now—I'm walking with a briefcase and documents, a man of Slavic appearance walks ahead of me, they [police in the metro] don't even check him but they stop me and put me in the [metro screening booth]. I get subjected to arbitrary checks all the time.¹³⁰

Shuhrat, a 38-year-old migrant from Tajikistan, said:

I was told before flying in [to Vnukovo airport in Moscow] that they [border guards] could just take your phone and check its contents, so I flew there prepared: I emptied my phone, there was nothing on it except WhatsApp communications with my family. When it was my turn, after checking my documents they asked for my phone. I gave it to them, confident. They held it for a while and then took me to a different room, where they showed me a photo on my phone of some guy with his back to the camera. He was wearing a shirt with some kind of a slogan about Ukraine. I told them it was not my photo. They asked me, “This is your phone, right?” I confirmed. They said, “Then this is also your photo.” They returned my passport and said I was banned from entering [Russia's territory]. I had to buy my own ticket back to Dushanbe.¹³¹

Dilshod, a 43-year-old Uzbek migrant recently deported from Russia where he had worked for a flower delivery service, told Human Watch that after the Crocus City Hall attack, police often stopped him in the metro and arbitrarily detained him. Whenever he asked questions, requested water, or asked to go to the toilet, they yelled at him using racist slurs and threatened him with violence.

Khurshed, a 24-year-old Tajik migrant recently deported from Russia, said:

¹³⁰ Human Rights Watch online interview with Bakyt, migrant from Kyrgyzstan, October 27, 2024.

¹³¹ Human Rights Watch online interview with Shuhrat, migrant from Tajikistan, October 20, 2024.

Usually there's a crowd of people there [in district police offices]. In a small room of 3 by 4 [meters] there were 18-20 people. You couldn't even breathe. They take away your phones. When they bring you to the police room, do they offer an interpreter to translate if you don't understand? Hahaha, of course they don't offer one, they don't care if you understand them or not.¹³²

As in many countries around the world, when dealing with the state, migrants from Central Asia often have to bear the burden of proof when dealing with authorities. Those who received Russian citizenship and do not have a "phenotypically Russian" appearance report having their citizenship questioned by public officials, who alleged that they bought their passports or presented other fake documents for their status.

Zarina, a 36-year-old migrant from Kyrgyzstan, told Human Rights Watch:

When I showed my documents [to police during a random stop and check], they laughed in my face and said they were fake. I told them to go and check and they said, "Oh, we sure will!" So, they detained me and took me to a police station where they held me for five hours. Only once they realized one of my family members is a Kyrgyz security agent (as was clear from my family's documents), they let me go, but they did not even apologize. It was clear they were disappointed they could not treat me the way they were treating all the others [migrants] in that detention room.¹³³

Stigmatization in the Media

Migrants are heavily stigmatized in Russian media, which is largely controlled by the Russian government.

According to analysis of Russian media coverage of migration for 2022-2023 by the *Cabar.Asia* project of the Institute for War and Peace Reporting, the number of publications in Russian media on migration issues increased significantly in this period compared to 2020-2021. The coverage focused mainly on the need for state control over migration in

¹³² Human Rights Watch online interview with Khurshed, migrant from Tajikistan, October 13, 2024.

¹³³ Human Rights Watch online interview with Zarina, migrant from Kyrgyzstan, August 1, 2024.

general, its demographic impact, and national security concerns with particular emphasis on illegal migration. The media's approach often lacked ethical journalistic standards, with a tendency to generalize individual cases of rule violations to the entire migrant population, reflecting the propagandistic nature of Russian media.¹³⁴ As an illustration, the analysis noted:

When a bus driver, who happened to be a migrant, fell asleep at the wheel in St. Petersburg, the media focused on his migrant status rather than on the fact that he was overworked. In contrast, the heroism of two migrants who jumped into the water [in 2024] to save people was largely ignored by the press.¹³⁵

In a December 2024 article on RIA *Novosti* (ria.ru), migrants were discussed in connection with extremism and terrorism. Without providing any specifics, the article claims illegal activities by migrants create tensions in interethnic and interfaith relations in Russia, “disrupting the historical balance and threatening state security,” and says labor migrants often become involved in extremist and terrorist activities, spread radical ideas, and participate in unauthorized public events.¹³⁶

In a December 2024 interview to RBC media outlet, Valery Fadeev, the head of Russia’s Human Rights Council, a body that reports to the Russian president said:

The country must be open, but the rules for accepting migrants into our country and issuing them passports must be very strict. We need people who can live with us, and not organize *kishlaki* [villages] inside our cities.¹³⁷

¹³⁴ “Migration Through Eyes of Russian Media” (Миграция глазами русскоязычных медиа: ужесточение негативной риторики про «чужих»), Cabar Asia, September 5, 2024, <https://cabar.asia/ru/migratsiya-glazami-russkoyazychnyh-media-uzhestochenie-negativnoj-ritoriki-pro-chuzhih>, (accessed January 9, 2025).

¹³⁵ Human Rights Watch online interview with Yan Matusevich, independent migration expert, August 3, 2024.

¹³⁶ “Anti-extremism Strategy Considered Role of Labor Migrants” (“В стратегии по экстремизму оценили роль деятельности трудовых мигрантов”), RIA Novosti, December 28, 2024, <https://ria.ru/20241228/migranty-1991927750.html>, (accessed January 9, 2025).

¹³⁷ “Head of Human Rights Committee Valery Fadeev Warns Against ‘Qishlaqs In Our Cities’” (“Глава СПЧ Валерий Фадеев предостерег от ‘кишлаков в наших городах’”), RBC, December 3, 2024, <https://www.rbc.ru/politics/03/12/2024/674de9309a794730ebea9eea>, (accessed January 10, 2025); Fadeev used a Tajik and Uzbek word for villages.

Another article in *Rossiyskaya Gazeta* from December 2024 discusses a legal initiative by members of the Russian Duma to limit how long migrants can stay in hostels and mini-hotels organized in private apartments, reducing the allowable period from one year to one month. The article quotes Leonid Slutsky, head of the LDPR party, a liberal-democratic party that used to lead the opposition, saying: “Several dozen migrants can live in one mini-hotel at once. Such a neighborhood causes discomfort to citizens and undermines the sense of security. Such workers behave aggressively, which causes conflicts and potentially dangerous situations.”¹³⁸

The negative portrayal of migrants in the Russian media may fuel already growing xenophobia in Russia. By consistently framing migration through the lens of security threats and cultural conflicts, media narratives contribute to the marginalization of migrant communities, making their integration more difficult and potentially pushing some individuals toward isolation or radicalization.

¹³⁸ “MPs Suggest To Look Closely At Hostels For Foreigners” (“Депутаты предлагают присмотреться к хостелам для приезжих”), *Rossiyskaya Gazeta*, December 24, 2024, <https://rg.ru/2024/12/24/priem-gostej-po-pravilam.html>, (accessed January 10, 2025).

VI. Relevant International Legal Standards on Non-Discrimination

Russia is a party to core international human rights treaties, including the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Racial Discrimination (ICERD), the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (ICCPR), the International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights (ICESCR), the Convention against Torture and Other Cruel, Inhuman, or Degrading Treatment or Punishment (CAT), and the Convention on the Rights of the Child (CRC).¹³⁹ Everyone in Russia, citizens and migrants alike, irrespective of immigration status, are entitled to the rights and protections guaranteed in these treaties and Russia's obligations to respect, protect and fulfil the rights in these treaties extend to all of those within Russian jurisdiction or under Russian control.

This report touches upon many of the rights protected under these treaties, including at a minimum the rights to life (art 6, ICCPR), to liberty and security and to freedom from arbitrary detention (art 9, ICCPR), to family and private life (art 17 ICCPR), to freedom from inhuman and degrading treatment (articles 7 and 10, ICCPR, articles 2 and 16 CAT) to due process including in relation to decisions to expel a migrant (articles 13 and 14 ICCPR) and to recognition and equality before the law (art 16 ICCPR), to freedom of movement (art 12 ICCPR) to labor protections (art 7 ICESCR), to housing (art 11 ICESCR), health (art 12 ICESCR), education (art 13 ICESCR, art 28 CRC) and an adequate standard of living (art 11 ICESCR), and to an effective remedy when their rights have been violated (art 2 ICCPR).

Central Asian migrants in Russia routinely face violations of these rights, including often as a result of discrimination against them based on their ethnic or national origin, whether they have acquired Russian citizenship or not. At the heart of the rights violations

¹³⁹ International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (ICCPR), adopted December 16, 1966, G.A. Res. 2200A (XXI), 21 UN GAOR Supp. (No. 16) at 52, UN Doc. A/6316 (1966), 999 U.N.T.S. 171, entered into force March 23, 1976, ratified by Russian Federation October 16, 1973; International Covenant on Economic, Social, and Cultural Rights, adopted December 16, 1966, G.A. Res. 2200A (XXI), 21 UN GAOR Supp. (No. 16) at 52, UN Doc. A/6316 (1966) 993 U.N.T.S. 3, entered into force January 3, 1976, ratified by Russian Federation October 16, 1973; International Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Racial Discrimination, G.A. res. 2106 (XX), Annex, 20 U.N. GAOR Supp. (No. 14) at 47, U.N. Doc. A/6014 (1966), 660 U.N.T.S. 195, entered into force January 4, 1969, ratified by Russian Federation February 4, 1969; Convention against Torture and Other Cruel, Inhuman, or Degrading Treatment or Punishment (Convention against Torture), adopted December 10, 1984, G.A. res. 39/46, annex, 39 U.N. GAOR Supp. (no. 41) at 197, U.N. Doc. A/39/51 (1984), entered into force June 26, 1987, ratified by Russian Federation March 3, 1987; Convention on the Rights of the Child, G.A. res. 44/25, annex, 44 U.N. GAOR Supp. (No. 49) at 167, U.N. Doc. A/44/49 (1989), entered into force September 2 1990, ratified by Russian Federation on August 16, 1990.

committed against Central Asian migrants documented in the report is Russia's abject failure to uphold and fulfil its obligations with respect to non-discrimination including on grounds of national origin.

Article 2 in the ICCPR, the ICESCR and the CRC affirm that the rights set out in the conventions apply to everyone without discrimination of any kind, on grounds that include national origin, religion, birth and other status, and in the case of the CRC without distinction to the national origin, religion, birth or other status of a child's parent or guardian.

The Committee on Economic Social and Cultural Rights, which oversees compliance with the ICESCR, in its general comment to states parties on non-discrimination in relation to economic and social rights explicitly affirmed that "the ground of nationality should not bar access to Covenant rights, e.g., all children within a State, including those with an undocumented status, have a right to receive education and access to adequate food and affordable health care."¹⁴⁰

ICERD as whole prohibits, and requires states to pursue all appropriate means to eliminate "racial discrimination", which is defined as "any distinction, exclusion, restriction or preference" based on race, color, descent, or national or ethnic origin "which has the purpose or effect of nullifying or impairing the recognition, enjoyment or exercise, on an equal footing, of human rights and fundamental freedoms in the political, economic, social, cultural or any other field of public life".

The UN Committee on the Elimination of Racial Discrimination, which oversees compliance with ICERD, has long issued a general recommendation providing guidance to states parties on what constitutes discrimination against non-citizens.¹⁴¹ The committee underscores that states parties are under an obligation to guarantee equality between citizens and non-citizens in the enjoyment of rights to the extent recognized under

¹⁴⁰ Committee on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights, General Comment No. 20: Non-Discrimination in Economic, Social and Cultural Rights, U.N. Doc. E/C.12/GC/20 (July 2, 2009), para. 30; see also para. 7: Non-discrimination is an immediate and cross-cutting obligation in the Covenant. .. It is to be noted that discrimination constitutes any distinction, exclusion, restriction or preference or other differential treatment that is directly or indirectly based on the prohibited grounds of discrimination and which has the intention or effect of nullifying or impairing the recognition, enjoyment or exercise, on an equal footing, of Covenant rights. Discrimination also includes incitement to discriminate and harassment.

¹⁴¹ Committee on the Elimination of Racial Discrimination, General Recommendation 30, Discrimination against Non-citizens (Sixty-fourth session, 2004), U.N. Doc. CERD/C/64/Misc.11/rev.3 (2004)

international law. According to the committee “differential treatment based on citizenship or immigration status will constitute discrimination if the criteria for such differentiation, judged in the light of the objectives and purposes of [ICERD], are not applied pursuant to a legitimate aim, and are not proportional to the achievement of this aim.” The committee called on states parties to pursue over 30 measures with the aim of eliminating discrimination against non-citizens, including:

- Ensuring that any measures taken in the fight against terrorism do not discriminate, in purpose or effect, on the grounds of race, color, descent, or national or ethnic origin and that non-citizens are not subjected to racial or ethnic profiling or stereotyping;
- Taking steps to address xenophobic attitudes and behavior towards non-citizens, in particular hate speech and racial violence, and to promote a better, understanding of the principle of non-discrimination in respect of the situation of non-citizens;
- Taking resolute action to counter any tendency to target, stigmatize, stereotype or profile, on the basis of race, color, descent, and national or ethnic origin, members of “non-citizen” population groups, especially by politicians, officials, educators and the media, on the Internet and other electronic communications networks and in society at large;
- Combatting ill-treatment of and discrimination against non-citizens by police and other law enforcement agencies and civil servants by strictly applying relevant legislation and regulations providing for sanctions and by ensuring that all officials dealing with non-citizens receive special training, including training in human rights;
- Removing obstacles that prevent the enjoyment of economic, social and cultural rights by non-citizens, notably in the areas of education, housing, employment and health;
- Ensuring that public educational institutions are open to non-citizens and children of undocumented immigrants residing in the territory of a state party.

Article 4 of ICERD requires states parties to condemn and criminalize the dissemination of racist ideas, incitement to racial discrimination, and acts of violence against any race or ethnic group. In June 2023 the committee issued its most recent concluding obligations

with respect to Russia's compliance with ICERD.¹⁴² The committee drew particular attention to the incidents of racist hate speech and hate crimes and racially motivated police violence and racial profiling and Russia's failings to combat either, calling on it to implement a series of measures to do so.

¹⁴² UN Committee of the Convention on Elimination of Racial Discrimination, Concluding Observations on the combined twenty-fifth and twenty-sixth periodic reports of the Russian Federation, CERD/C/RUS/CO/25-26, June 1, 2023, <https://digitallibrary.un.org/record/4012481?v=pdf>, (accessed December 10, 2024).

Acknowledgments

This report was researched and written by Syinat Sultanalieva, Central Asia researcher in the Europe and Central Asia (ECA) Division of Human Rights Watch.

The report was reviewed by Hugh Williamson, director, Tanya Lokshina, associate director, and Mihra Rittman, senior researcher in the ECA division; Bill Frelick, director of the Refugee and Migrant Rights division; Zama Neff, director of the Children Rights division; Kyle Knight, associate director in the LGBT rights division; Sam Dubberley, managing director in the Digital Investigations Lab; Aisling Reidy, senior legal advisor; and Joseph Saunders, deputy program director.

Aleks Lokhmutov, ECA research assistant, assisted significantly with data and legal analysis.

Elly Bleier, ECA senior associate, assisted with proofreading and formatting. Travis Carr, publications officer, prepared the report for publication.

Dmitry Shabelnikov translated the report from English to Russian.

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We wish to express our gratitude to all of those who spoke with us during this research, and particularly to the migrants who have either left Russia or are still on its territory, who shared their stories, and the lawyers and human rights defenders dedicated to supporting them.

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Appendix I: Human Rights Watch Letter to Kyrgyzstan's Ministry of Foreign Affairs



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Rachel Denber, *Deputy Director*
Benjamin Ward, *Deputy Director*
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Bruno Stagno Ugarte, *Chief Advocacy Officer*

October 28, 2024

Reference № KG-001-MFA202410-28

Mr. Zheenbek Kulubaev
Minister of Foreign Affairs of the Kyrgyz Republic

Erkindik Boulevard 57
720040 Bishkek
Kyrgyzstan

Dear Minister Zheenbek Moldokanovich,

On behalf of Human Rights Watch, please accept my regards.

I am writing to present a summary of Human Rights Watch's main findings from our research on xenophobia and violations of rights of migrants from Central Asia (including Kyrgyzstan, Uzbekistan, Tajikistan) in Russia, which will be published in a report before the end of the year. We would like to reflect the views of the Government of Kyrgyzstan in the report and look forward to your response to this letter and our preliminary findings.

We also kindly request the assistance of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs in delivering the attached summary of findings letters and their Russian translations to the Ministry of Labour, Social Welfare, and Migration.

As you may know, Human Rights Watch is an independent, international, nonpartisan nongovernmental organization working in over 90 countries worldwide. We conduct research and carry out advocacy on a range of human rights issues, including the rights of migrants and asylum seekers. Recent examples of our work in this area include a 2021 report on abuses of asylum seekers by US border officials and a 2017 report on exploitation of construction workers on World Cup sites in Russia.

Preliminary Findings and Questions

In the months following the March 22, 2024, attack on Crocus City Hall in Moscow, for which ISIS-Khorasan claimed responsibility, Russian and Central Asian media reported an escalation in Russia of xenophobia and violence against Central Asian migrants and other individuals without a Slavic appearance.

Russia's economy has long been dependent on migrant labor, yet migrant workers, particularly those from Central Asia, have for years faced persistent discrimination in Russia. The recent Crocus City Hall attack has exacerbated anti-migrant sentiment and discrimination, leading to a marked increase in ethnic profiling, arbitrary arrests, and violent reprisals against Central Asian communities by Russian police.

Rather than condemning these discriminatory actions, Russia's leadership has intensified its targeting of Central Asian migrants, including through passing harsher migrant-related legislation.

In June 2024 Human Rights Watch commenced research on this issue, documenting human rights violations perpetrated against Kyrgyz, Uzbek, Tajik migrants in Russia.

Migrant returnees in Kyrgyzstan and migrants in Russia told Human Rights Watch that they have experienced physical violence, including street violence by private actors, and excessive use of force and torture and ill-treatment by law enforcement officers. Physical intimidation was often accompanied by anti-migrant slurs and slogans, and sometimes escalated violence – including beatings by groups of people, attacks with pepper spray and knives, and destruction of migrant-owned property.

Human Rights Watch also documented how some migrants were subject to arbitrary and unjustified administrative controls at the border, including unlawful searches of their property, only to be barred from entering Russia and made to buy return tickets at their own expense, without explanation. They also described lengthy detentions at the airport followed by collective expulsions and re-entry bans.

Migrants who have successfully entered Russia have also experienced discriminatory refusal of their services and job dismissals, with no recourse for redress. Police subject them to arbitrary stops-and-checks, based on their non-Slavic appearance.

Thousands have been forced to return from Russia to Kyrgyzstan, Uzbekistan, Tajikistan as subjects of summary deportation or collective expulsion orders.

Migrant returnees also told Human Rights Watch how there were attempts to force them to sign contracts with the Russian Ministry of Defense to serve in the war in Ukraine under threat of deportation or imprisonment for minor infractions of Russian administrative law. All of them have refused and forced to leave Russia.

Could the government of Kyrgyzstan please provide answers to the following questions:

1. What support does your government provide to Kyrgyz labor migrants in Russia?
2. In the last three years, have you tracked cases of such violence and if so, what has been your government's response to cases of xenophobic violence by private and state actors against Kyrgyz migrants in Russia? How has your government addressed the current rise in xenophobia towards Kyrgyz nationals following the Crocus City Hall attack? Please provide examples.
3. Has your government, through your embassies or otherwise, received requests from your citizens subjected to forced recruitment to Russia's war efforts in Ukraine, including recruitment in Russian [prisons](#)? If so, how has your government responded to this and to existing [reports](#) of forced recruitment ?
4. How is your government planning to respond to legal amendments that toughen Russia's migration policy, including provisions, adopted at both the federal and regional levels that have already been adopted that prohibit migrants from performing certain types of jobs as well as the "regime of banishment" that will be applicable to migrants from February 2025?
5. Have there been any discussions on how exactly these limitations will be applied to migrants from Kyrgyzstan, considering Kyrgyzstan's membership in the Eurasian Economic Union?

We kindly request any comments or information by November 11, 2024, so that we have adequate opportunity to reflect your relevant responses in our forthcoming publication. Please send your responses to Ms Syinat Sultanalieva by email at [REDACTED] or via Whatsapp/Telegram at +1 [REDACTED], or directly to me by email at [REDACTED].

Thank you for your attention to this important matter. We appreciate the constructive dialogue we have with the government of Kyrgyzstan on the human rights of Kyrgyz citizens residing and working in Russia.

With thanks,



Hugh Williamson
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Appendix II: Human Rights Watch Letter to Kyrgyzstan's Ministry of Labour, Social Welfare, and Migration

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October 28, 2024

Reference № KG-001-MLSWM202410-28

Ms. Jyldyz Polotova
Minister of Labour, Social Welfare, and Migration of the Kyrgyz Republic

Re: Questions to Government of Kyrgyzstan related to preliminary findings from
research on violations of rights of migrants from Kyrgyzstan in Russia

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Preliminary Findings and Questions

HUMAN RIGHTS WATCH

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In the months following the March 22, 2024, attack on Crocus City Hall in Moscow, for which ISIS-Khorasan claimed responsibility, Russian and Central Asian media reported an escalation in Russia of xenophobia and violence against Central Asian migrants and other individuals without a Slavic appearance.

Russia's economy has long been dependent on migrant labor, yet migrant workers, particularly those from Central Asia, have for years faced persistent discrimination in Russia. The recent Crocus City Hall attack has exacerbated anti-migrant sentiment and discrimination, leading to a marked increase in ethnic profiling, arbitrary arrests, and violent reprisals against Central Asian communities by Russian police.

Rather than condemning these discriminatory actions, Russia's leadership has intensified its targeting of Central Asian migrants, including through passing harsher migrant-related legislation.

In June 2024 Human Rights Watch commenced research on this issue, documenting human rights violations perpetrated against Kyrgyz, Uzbek, Tajik migrants in Russia.

Migrant returnees in Kyrgyzstan and migrants in Russia told Human Rights Watch that they have experienced physical violence, including street violence by private actors, and excessive use of force and torture and ill-treatment by law enforcement officers. Physical intimidation was often accompanied by anti-migrant slurs and slogans, and sometimes escalated violence – including beatings by groups of people, attacks with pepper spray and knives, and destruction of migrant-owned property.

Human Rights Watch also documented how some migrants were subject to arbitrary and unjustified administrative controls at the border, including unlawful searches of their property, only to be barred from entering Russia and made to buy return tickets at their own expense, without explanation. They also described lengthy detentions at the airport followed by collective expulsions and re-entry bans.

Migrants who have successfully entered Russia have also experienced discriminatory refusal of their services and job dismissals, with no recourse for redress. Police subject them to arbitrary stops-and-checks, based on their non-Slavic appearance.

Thousands have been forced to return from Russia to Kyrgyzstan, Uzbekistan, Tajikistan as subjects of summary deportation or collective expulsion orders.

Migrant returnees also told Human Rights Watch how there were attempts to force them to sign contracts with the Russian Ministry of Defense to serve in the war in Ukraine under threat of deportation or imprisonment for minor infractions of Russian administrative law. All of them have refused and forced to leave Russia.

Could the government of Kyrgyzstan please provide answers to the following questions:

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7. In the last three years, have you tracked cases of such violence and if so, what has been your government's response to cases of xenophobic violence by private and state actors against Kyrgyz migrants in Russia? How has your government addressed the current rise in xenophobia towards Kyrgyz nationals following the Crocus City Hall attack? Please provide examples.
8. Has your government, through your embassies or otherwise, received requests from your citizens subjected to forced recruitment to Russia's war efforts in Ukraine, including recruitment in Russian [prisons](#)? If so, how has your government responded to this and to existing [reports](#) of forced recruitment ?
9. How is your government planning to respond to legal amendments that toughen Russia's migration policy, including provisions, adopted at both the federal and regional levels that have already been adopted that prohibit migrants from performing certain types of jobs as well as the "regime of banishment" that will be applicable to migrants from February 2025?
10. Have there been any discussions on how exactly these limitations will be applied to migrants from Kyrgyzstan, considering Kyrgyzstan's membership in the Eurasian Economic Union?

We kindly request any comments or information by November 11, 2024, so that we have adequate opportunity to reflect your relevant responses in our forthcoming publication. Please send your responses to Ms Syinat Sultanalieva by email at [REDACTED] or via Whatsapp/Telegram at +1 [REDACTED], or directly to me by email at [REDACTED].

Thank you for your attention to this important matter. We appreciate the constructive dialogue we have with the government of Kyrgyzstan on the human rights of Kyrgyz citizens residing and working in Russia.

With thanks,



Hugh Williamson
Executive Director
Europe and Central Asia Division
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10178 Berlin, Germany



Appendix III: Kyrgyzstan's Ministry of Foreign Affairs Response to Human Rights Watch

**КЫРГЫЗ РЕСПУБЛИКАСЫНЫН
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**МИНИСТЕРСТВО
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26.11.2024 № 13-01/2888к

На № _____ от _____

Директору Отделения
Human Rights Watch по
Европе и Центральной Азии
г-ну Хью Уильямсону

Уважаемый Хью Уильямсон,

Консульский департамент Министерства иностранных дел Кыргызской Республики свидетельствует Вам свое уважение и, в ответ на обращение в адрес Министра иностранных дел Кыргызской Республики Ж.Кулубаева от 28 октября 2024 года, имеет честь сообщить следующее.

Приоритетной задачей Министерства и зарубежных учреждений Кыргызской Республики за рубежом являются защиты прав и интересов граждан Кыргызстана.

Ввиду большого количества граждан Кыргызской Республики, пребывающих на территории России (в первом полугодии текущего года пребывало 350 тысяч граждан КР) вопросы правового положения наших соотечественников, создания благоприятных условий для их пребывания, а также решения проблемных вопросов обсуждаются с российской стороной на постоянной основе.

Последняя встреча на высоком уровне по обсуждению актуальных вопросов состоялась 24 октября 2024 года в г.Москве в рамках 17-го заседания межведомственной кыргызско-российской рабочей группы, где были обсуждены вопросы, связанные с пребыванием граждан КР в РФ. На данном заседании кыргызскую делегацию возглавила Министр труда, социального обеспечения и миграции КР Ж.Полотова.

При этом необходимо отметить, что правила въезда и пребывания граждан Кыргызской Республики в Российской Федерации не изменились и каких-либо дополнительных требований от российской стороны по допуску наших граждан в Россию не введено.

Действительно, после трагических событий в «Крокус Сити Холле» в международных пунктах пропуска через государственную границу России, в

том числе в аэропортах города Москвы продолжают действовать усиленные меры контроля, направленные на обеспечение безопасности и антитеррористической защищенности.

Вследствие этого в последние месяцы участились случаи отказов во въезде иностранным гражданам, в том числе гражданам Кыргызской Республики на территорию Российской Федерации.

Также российские правоохранительные органы усилили работу по выявлению и привлечению к ответственности тех иностранцев, которые находятся в территории России нарушая миграционное законодательство.

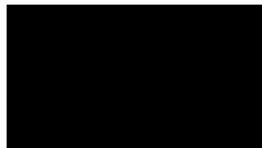
Кроме того, иницируются и принимаются новые законы, ужесточающие правила пребывания иностранцев в Российской Федерации.

Вводимые российской стороной ограничения в отношении иностранных граждан в рамках ужесточения миграционного режима, в частности по осуществлению на ее территории трудовой деятельности, не должны распространяться на граждан Кыргызской Республики ввиду ее членства в ЕАЭС, где для граждан стран-участниц экономического союза предусмотрены соответствующие преференции.

Департамент пользуется случаем, чтобы возобновить Вам уверения в своем высоком уважении.

С уважением,

Заместитель директора
Консульского департамента



Б.Кадыров

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Living In Fear and Humiliation

Rising Xenophobic Harassment and Violence towards Central Asian Migrants in Russia

Xenophobic harassment and violence against Central Asian labor migrants in Russia have increased noticeably since Russian authorities detained four Tajik men as suspects in the March 22, 2024, attack on Moscow's Crocus City Hall that left at least 144 people dead and many injured. In the past year migrants from Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan and Uzbekistan have faced police profiling, arbitrary arrests and mass deportations, service denials and job dismissals. Ultra-nationalist groups have conducted vicious coordinated physical assaults on Central Asians, sharing videos of them as revenge for the concert hall incident.

Living in Fear and Humiliation is based on interviews with Central Asian migrants with experience of work in Russia, lawyers, and migration experts, and analysis of social media posts including videos. Russian authorities have taken no measures to condemn violent speech or acts and even though Russia's economy is dependent on migrant labor, have implemented stricter migration laws, including a new "expulsion regime" that limits migrants' rights, and moved to exclude migrant children from education. As part of Russia's war in Ukraine, Central Asian migrants and naturalized citizens are also being targeted for forced military recruitment.

Human Rights Watch calls on the Russian authorities to address xenophobic harassment, discrimination, and violence against Central Asian migrants, and guarantee their rights. Human Rights Watch urges the governments of Kyrgyzstan, Uzbekistan, and Tajikistan to build on current efforts to strengthen protections for their citizens working as labor migrants in Russia. United Nations agencies and the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe should support Russia and the Central Asian governments in improving protection of migrants' rights.



Migrants wearing protective face masks walk in front of Russian flag graffiti in Moscow, April 13, 2020.

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