

## **Caucasian Migrants' Struggle in Russia**

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Armenians and Azerbaijanis look for ways round new curbs on migrant workers, while Georgians take most of the heat.

Hanum Musabieva, who comes from Azerbaijan, used to sell vegetables at the Dubki market in the Russian North Caucasian city of Nalchik. She had been doing this work for ten years, re-registering herself and her husband every three months.

A new law that came into force in the Russian Federation on April 1, restricting the rights of foreigners to trade in Russian markets, put a stop to that.

The Musabievs decided to send their three children back to Azerbaijan but they themselves decided to stick it out in Nalchik.

To get round the new regulations, the couple hired a Russian assistant to sell their produce at their market and their family budget is a lot tighter as a result. "We didn't put up the prices of our products," said Musabieva. "Who would have carried on buying from us? Of course we are earning less. Now we only have enough for bread."

At first glance, it is Azerbaijanis – who used to dominate Russia's market trade – who have most to fear from Russia's new rules. But research by IWPR suggests that Azerbaijanis and Armenians are generally learning to live with the new state of affairs, while it is Georgians – victims of a high-level political dispute between Tbilisi and Moscow – who are suffering most.

Currently, 2,500 Azerbaijanis and around 5,000 Georgians live in Kabardino-Balkaria. There are no exact figures about Armenians but the numbers are similar.

Artur Bugov, head of the department of labour migration and migration control at the Federal Migration Service in Nalchik, said the number of Armenians coming to work in the autonomous republic in Kabardino-Balkaria has actually increased since the law was passed.

The new law forbids foreigners working in markets in Russia. Other regulations have sharply increased fines for employers who hire foreigners illegally and have put quotas on workers allowed to come from abroad.

Russia's Federal Migration Service has estimated that there are around ten million people working in Russia illegally, the majority of them from neighbouring former Soviet countries. Several million of these come from Armenia, Azerbaijan and Georgia.

The director of the service Konstantin Romodanovsky said the new rules made sense for everybody. "People who come to Russia to offer their labour and at the same time help their families back home can now have the necessary documents processed much more simply and receive social benefits for their work," he said.

His deputy director, Vyacheslav Postavnin, argued that the new regulations had not damaged the trade sector in Russia. "There are no problems with the markets, the situation has stabilised," he said. "If prices went up in some regions it happened as part of seasonal fluctuations."

Postavnin said that the most law-abiding guest workers came to Russia from Tajikistan, China, Ukraine and Turkey and that they immediately tried to get legal status to work in the country. Three quarters of a million foreigners had been given the right to work in Russia this year.

He said that most of the Federal Migration Service's concerns were about Azerbaijanis.

An opinion poll by the VTsIOM agency revealed that only a quarter of Russians had noticed the disappearance of foreigners from markets.

Leading diaspora figures from the South Caucasus are not convinced by these reassurances and say the changes will cause social problems.

Ali Dadashev, chairman of Kabardino-Balkaria's Azerbaijani Cultural Centre, called the new law "stupid". He argued that the Russian population was declining and that Russia positively needed new immigrants, not to make their lives more difficult.

"This is a blind and short-sighted policy from the Russian leadership," said Dadashev's Georgian counterpart, businessman and head of the Georgian Cultural Centre Georgi Lobzhanidze, predicting a rise in inter-ethnic tensions. "Before you adopt a law like this you should think carefully how the people will react."

## ARMENIANS ADAPTING

Lusine, aged 32, is an Armenian who lives in the North Caucasian republic of Karachai-Cherkessia with her family. She used to run her own bakery but the costs rose so high that she now bakes bread at home and delivers it to shops.

Lusine, her husband and her 16-year-old daughter live in Russia without registration papers.

"At first this new law caused us problems, the police were persecuting people but now everything seems to have calmed down and there aren't so many cases like that," she said.

"When the police begin to comb the markets, the Armenians hide and wait to come out until the police have gone.

"Where we live, attitudes are kinder - except to the Georgians. We look alike and it's hard to tell the difference between us. It's not like in Moscow, Stavropol or Krasnodar where they stop you at every step and harass you. We don't have that. It's calm here and there are Armenians working in the markets."

Artur Sakunts, a human rights activist from the Armenian town of Vanadzor, said Armenians were learning to adapt to the new rules. "People used to give bribes to stay in the country illegally," he said. "Now passport officials will take bribes to give out temporary registration."

Sakunts said the reason for the new law had less to do with migration than with high politics, "There are political motives in the new immigration rules which Russia is using to try to put pressure on Georgia and on all post-Soviet countries so that they don't turn towards NATO."

## GEORGIANS SQUEEZED

The Georgians are suffering the most from Russia's new migration policies.

Nana, a Georgian citizen, has been travelling to Russia every year for the past 13 years to work. For the last two years, she has been working as a waitress in a Georgian restaurant in Moscow.

Nana asked for her real name not to be used because she is worried about having new problems in getting the right documents to travel to Moscow.

Generally, at this time of year she is already in Moscow, but since the flare-up in Georgian-Russian relations last year she has been unable to get a visa to travel to Russia.

A Georgian parliamentary commission estimates that 4,634 Georgian citizens were deported from Russia during last autumn and winter.

There is no sign of either side moving to end the economic standoff.

Pro-government parliamentarian Giga Bokeria has said that neither the government nor parliament in Georgia will take any steps to ease the problems of Georgians wishing to work in Russia.

According to the World Bank, remittances from Russia constitute five per cent of Georgia's GDP. The real figures are certainly higher as much of the money is sent in roundabout fashion.

There are an estimated one million Georgians living in Russia. In addition, around 90,000 Georgians go to Russia each year for seasonal work. Typically, these workers come from the provinces of Georgia, have no higher education and are aged between 25 and 35.

They are the ones worst affected by the transport blockade on Georgia imposed by Russia last autumn.

In May, Federal Migration Service deputy head Vyacheslav Postavnin, appeared to utter a veiled threat towards Georgia, saying, “When it comes to attracting labour migrants it is always better to give the priority to those countries with which Russia has good relations, including trading and economic relations, where there is a positive attitude.”

Nana is pessimistic about her prospects of getting back to work in Russia. “No employer is going to run round and collect documents on my behalf, I know that for sure,” she said.

Armen Khnkoyan, a 35-year-old Georgian citizen and ethnic Armenian, has been travelling to Russia for six years for work. But last year, he and his friend were detained in a Moscow airport and sent back to Georgia.

“No one gave us any reason,” he said. “It was just that we were citizens of Georgia.

“They drive us out of there, they hate us. How can we work with them if they are driving us away?”

Yet Khnkoyan says that tens of thousands of people from Georgia will still try to work in Russia because the rewards are so high.

“In six months you can make four thousand [US] dollars,” he said. “I worked on a building site in Mytishchi [outside Moscow] and earned that much. Here I could not make 1,500 dollars in an entire year. We barely survive on that.”

“Our people will keep on going to Russia to work because there is no other way of earning money. They will go and work in remote places where they can do deals with the local police.”

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