

Dagestan, Azerbaijan Struggle With New Rules

Cross border travellers face a more difficult and expensive journey after change in regulations.

The Azerbaijan-Russia border post was extraordinarily quiet, as if it was protecting a closed zone – this on a frontier where more than ten million people used a single crossing point over a six month period last year.

The first question that the border guards ask all visitors is if they were in possession of a foreign passport. New regulations that came into force on March 5 now require that international travel documents are produced by anyone crossing the land frontier between the Russian republic of Dagestan and Azerbaijan.

Before the republics gained independence in 1991, citizens travelled freely within the old Soviet Union by producing internal identification documents, and only needed an international or “foreign” passport for travel outside the country. As a result, few people possess them.

Local people claim that the new rules are dividing families and encouraging bribe taking on what is already a notoriously corrupt border.

Several people who were turned back at the crossing on March 5 - because they did not have the correct passports – expressed their anger. Some claimed that they had not heard of the new regulations, while others said that they had been under the impression that the changes did not affect residents of border areas.

“I heard in OVIR [the official passport office] that it didn’t concern us,” said Said Tagiev, a Russian citizen who works near the border.

Several people from the Dagestani town of Derbent said that queues had formed in the passport office and places had to be occupied several hours in advance. “If you want to get a passport quickly, in one day say, then you have to pay ten or 15 times more,” said Rovshan Magomedov. “Otherwise you have to wait 25 or 30 days.”

Last year Russian president Vladimir Putin reaffirmed his commitment to visa-free travel between his country and Azerbaijan. But the requirement to hold foreign passports caught most people on both sides of the frontier by surprise.

The seizure of a school in Beslan by Chechen extremists last September changed the situation dramatically. This border was virtually shut down, cutting relatives off from each other, and train tickets could only be obtained several weeks in advance.

In January the situation was further complicated by Baku’s refusal to sell train tickets for destinations in neighbouring countries to those citizens who did not possess a foreign passport.

Bekmurza Bekmurzayev, a Russian foreign ministry official in Makhachkala, defended the new changes as unavoidable.

"It has been done not to impose entry or exit restrictions on people, but to bring order to the legislation of the Russian Federation," he said. "After the formation of the sovereign states of the Commonwealth of Independent States Russia signed an agreement with them guaranteeing that citizens could cross CIS borders with only internal passports. That was partly connected with territorial disputes.

"But now that issue has been finally settled with Azerbaijan and so we signed an agreement in accordance with which from March 5 2005 ordinary citizens can only cross the border with foreign passports."

The new system has come as a particular shock to two categories of people – traders and ethnic groups living in the border area.

Thousands of traders make their living travelling across the border and are an important part of the economy of both countries. And several ethnic groups - including Lezgins, Avars and ethnic Azerbaijanis - live in both Dagestan and Azerbaijan and have relatives on the other side of the border. Officially, there are 170,000 Lezgins in Azerbaijan and 200,000 in Dagestan – although unofficial estimates place the former figure much higher.

On the ground there is now confusion and chaos. On March 5, the cost of the crossing had risen threefold. One taxi-driver complained that every time he crossed the border they put a stamp in his passport and that the empty pages of his passport were running out fast. "There are disastrously few customers," he said. "Our income has gone down drastically."

A lot of money is made on this border. "The bridge between Azerbaijan and Dagestan is called 'golden' because of the extortion," said Alyuset Azizkhanov, head of the non-governmental organisation Nabat, which works with refugees in Dagestan. "I've had experience of that myself many times crossing the border."

And he warned that the need for foreign passports would only increase the corruption. "Despite all the assurances that document checking at the command post is just a formality, the border can close down any time without warning," he said.

It is now almost impossible to cross this frontier in your own car. "My brother could not make it to my wedding," said one Dagestani from the town of Derbent.

"He lives in Baku and I live here - we are citizens of different states. His wife is pregnant and he wanted to come in his own car so she was more comfortable, but people who had tried to cross the border in their own vehicles told him not even to try.

"For the border guards a car with number-plates of the neighbouring state is as a red rag to a bull. A whole stream of provocative questions starts up and it ends up with them having to pay the [guards a bribe]."

Dagestani businessman Arsen said that he now leaves his car at home and "spared money and nerves" by taking a minibus or taxi to the border.

Almost everyone who crosses here is forced to pay a 50-rouble (around two US dollars) tax for no apparent reason. Khatuna, a Russian citizen who is registered as resident in the Azerbaijani capital Baku, frequently travels to see her brothers in Dagestan and claims that the guards routinely demand money from her. "Every time they tell me that my registration means nothing," she complained.

Experienced travellers claim that the Russian border guards are greedier. One student travelling to Derbent with just a bag of personal possessions complained that he had been forced to pay 500 roubles (around 18 dollars).

But Dagestan political analyst Zubairu Zubairuyev defended the new regulations, and predicted that the situation would quieten down with time.

“There will be shouting, uproar, maybe even hunger-strikes,” Zubairuyev told IWPR. “There will be queues in the road and weeping women.

“For some time it will affect prices in the markets, but this will be temporary. When people understand that they can only cross the border with a foreign passport they will have to get one. And then it will all stop. And it won’t harm our economies on a state level.”

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