

## **Southern Russia's Migrants Face Deportation**

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The authorities in Krasnodar are planning tough new measures against south Caucasian immigrants.

The Krasnodar regional authorities plan to open a new centre in the Black Sea port of Sochi to enable them to deport hundreds of foreigners as part of an ongoing crackdown on immigrants in southern Russia.

Alexander Sidorenko, deputy governor of Krasnodar, said in an interview that 15 million roubles (around half a million US dollars) had been allocated to build a new centre to house around 100 "illegal immigrants" - most of whom arrive from the South Caucasus - prior to their deportation.

While declining to name an actual date, Sidorenko said he hoped the new centre would start operating "within the next two months, at the end of April or the beginning of May", adding that the centre's inmates would be given "acceptable living conditions".

The authorities in Krasnodar, taking their lead from outspoken governor Alexander Tkachev, frequently lash out at the tens of thousands of foreigners who have settled in the southern Russian region, claiming that they pose a political and economic threat.

"Around one million people have arrived in our region between 1990 and today," Tkachev told regional television viewers last December. "In some places there will soon be more migrants than native inhabitants and we are beginning to face the prospect of Krasnodar becoming the Russian Kosovo."

These remarks have worried representatives of the dozens of different ethnic communities living in the region, although they refuse to comment publicly on the issue for fear of antagonising the authorities.

Immigration control has now become a national priority. Moscow's federal migration service announced recently that between three and a half and five million migrants enter the country every year. The head of the migration service Andrei Chernenko said that while Russia has more than 500 border crossings, only 114 of them have strict immigration controls.

"In some areas illegal immigration has risen to alarming levels," Chernenko said recently. "Migrants are taking jobs which Russian citizens could be holding."

Taking his cue from Moscow, deputy governor Sidorenko announced that, "The most effective way of solving the problem is deportation. And by building a deportation centre in Sochi we confirm our firm intention to impose order."

A campaign of deportation will hit hundreds of unregistered immigrants in the Krasnodar region, many of whom have fled the conflicts of the south Caucasus, very hard. In Sochi they are several thousand Georgians from Abkhazia, most of whom have nowhere to go back to until a political settlement is reached between Tbilisi and Sukhumi.

The Shengelaya family fled Abkhazia in October 1993 at the end of the war. In Soviet times they were well off, owning a two-storey house and a citrus orchard, which gave them a good income. Nowadays Revaz Shengelaya cooks Georgian food for a tiny café in Sochi market.

"My tangerine orchard used to produce a harvest of 25 tonnes," Shengelaya recalled. "We had enough money to buy a new car and live well to the next season."

"And now we're just vagrants. At every step the police ask us to show our passport with the Sochi stamp or temporary registration. It's impossible to get citizenship or get registered without any money because of corruption - and where can we find the cash?"

Asked if he fears deportation, Shengelaya's nostalgia turns to anger. "Where will they send me? Georgia? But I'm not a citizen of that country as I still have my old Soviet passport. To my old address in Abkhazia? My house has been burned down and they will shoot me for fighting against the Abkhaz during the war."

"It won't be easy to deport me - but let them try! I'd rather be in a Russian jail than in my grave!"

However, the Krasnodar authorities are indeed targeting people such as Shengelaya. "If we are talking about Georgians, who fled Abkhazia and did not receive Russian citizenship in the last few years, then it's quite likely they will be deported to Georgia, as many of them are citizens of that country," Alexei Zakharenko, head of the Sochi migration service said in an interview.

Deportation of immigrants in fear of persecution could put Russia in contravention of several of the international agreements it has signed. But Zakharenko said this concern did not fall "within our obligations".

"When it comes down to it, we can't and shouldn't be responsible for the consequences of all the conflicts in the Caucasus," Zakharenko said.

"Why should our pensioners, government employees have to bear the cost of this? All those citizens could live better if the state was not losing money because some people live here illegally, pay no taxes and, quite probably, send the money they earn out of Russia?"

The status of most ex-Soviet migrants is something of a lottery, depending on what documents they have. Nabi Suleimanov from Azerbaijan is one of the luckier ones. His brother, who lives in Dagestan, has registered him there and he also has a document saying that he is in the process of receiving Russian citizenship. "It means I am half a citizen of the Russian Federation," he joked.

Sochi remains a popular location for foreigners partly because they can easily slip across the border into Abkhazia and re-enter Russia. In this way they get round the regulations which forbid them from staying on Russian territory for more than six months at a time.

The border with Abkhazia on the Psou River is just south of Sochi and it is easy for a foreigner whose temporary registration documents are due to expire to make the trip across. He can then return within one hour, receiving a stamp in his passport that he is entering the Russian Federation and re-apply for registration.

But for many, even this short trip is too much. Official statistics suggest that around 40 per cent of foreigners registered in Sochi stay on in the city illegally when their registration runs out.

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**Location:** Caucasus  
Stavropol  
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