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Campaign Against Migrants Gains Momentum as Elections Loom

By Alexander Panin

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Moscow Region Governor Andrei Vorobyov. **Maxim Stulov / Vedomosti**

All illegal street markets will be closed in the Moscow region by the end of this year, acting Moscow region governor Andrei Vorobyov said Wednesday as the campaign against illegal immigrants amid two key elections was gaining momentum.

During debates on regional television on Tuesday, Vorobyov boasted a 15 percent decrease in immigrants coming to the region in search for work over the last two months, with many of them making a living by selling goods at street markets.

Latest opinion polls reveal that on the whole, Russians consider immigrants to be the main threat to their safety. And as the mayoral election in the capital and the Moscow region's gubernatorial race are approaching, illegal immigrants have become one of the issues to which the authorities devote much attention.

In July, President Vladimir Putin signed a law that imposed harsher fines on people who come and stay in the country illegally. Individuals who violate migration rules in Moscow and St. Petersburg and the Moscow and Leningrad regions starting from August 9 are fined up to 7,000 rubles ($211). Also, companies employing illegal immigrants can face fines up to 1 million rubles. In addition, the law made it impossible for authorities to find immigrants without deporting them.

A Taste For Camps

Following the adoption of the law and a violent fight between police officers and vendors at the Matveyevsky market, a series of raids began at street markets in Moscow. Media reports said the result was that some 1,400 illegal immigrants, mostly Vietnamese nationals and citizens from former Soviet countries, were detained.

The existing detention facilities in the city were quickly filled and a makeshift tent camp was set up in the Galyanovo district in eastern Moscow where some 400 illegal immigrants awaited deportation.

On Tuesday, the tent camp in Galyanovo was closed. Some foreigners were deported and 234 people were transferred to a detention facility in the Severny district, located in northeastern Moscow, the police said in a statement.

While the city authorities are so far not planning to set up new detention camps inside Moscow, there is an intention to create several ones in the Moscow region.

The regional migration agency said earlier that there are about 300,000 illegal immigrants in the Moscow region.

Almost a thousand of them were deported last week, Andrei Vorobyov said Tuesday.

The Federal Migration Service said earlier that four detention centers for illegal immigrants are needed at four equidistant locations across the region to ensure full coverage.

Moreover, the Federal Migration Service recently came up with a bill to set up 83 new detention centers for illegal immigrants across the country.

Starting from January 2014, foreign citizens who are awaiting deportation will not be confined at ordinary police facilities, as it is practiced now, but will have to be held at special detention centers supervised by the migration service.

Vorobyov earlier announced plans to build the first migration center costing 200 million rubles in the Yegoryevsk district but was opposed by local residents who said they would "die first" before such a center would appear in their neighborhood.

A Day Without Immigrants

There were more than 1 million officially registered immigrants in the Moscow region in 2012 and more than 1.7 million in the capital.

According to the migration service, more than 60 percent of immigrants in the Moscow

region are employed by sole proprietorships.

"Most of them are working in the construction, utilities and retail industries," said Nikita Mkrtchyan, a research fellow at the Demographics Institute of the Higher School of Economics.

He said that close to 70 percent of all immigrants that are working in Russia are living in the country illegally.

But it is impossible to deport all of the immigrants, since the authorities are not physically capable of doing that, the expert said.

"They deport 1,000, 2,000, 3,000, but it is a drop in the ocean. A lot more stay," Mkrtchyan said. "Even during the crisis of 2008 and 2009, when a lot of construction cites employing immigrants closed, according to our colleagues monitoring the situation in Tajikistan, only 15 percent came back," he added.

Also, employing illegal immigrants is profitable for businesses.

"You can do whatever you want with an illegal immigrant. For instance, you can fire them without fearing that he will go to court," Mkrtchan said.

For the same reason, Russians are unlikely to work as janitors, street cleaners and low-level construction workers.

"You would have to provide a competitive salary and reasonable living conditions for them, while immigrants live in barracks or even basements and do not complain," the expert said.

Immigrants themselves are ready to come out of the shadow, obtain legal status and pay taxes, their representatives said, but that is not what is truly expected by businesses and the authorities that help them.

"What they need is the illegal slave status the immigrants have here," said Madzhumder Amin, president of the Russian Federation of Migrants, a group fighting for immigrants' rights, at a recent news conference organized by Moskovsky Komsomolets.

"The notorious Cherkizovsky market was closed in 2008, but five years later they found an illegal factory and 1,500 Vietnamese workers there. Who was made responsible — the migration service or the local government? No, the Vietnamese were," Amin said.

There is demand for immigrants in Russia and, no matter how hard living conditions are and what the government does to prevent illegal migration, they will still come.

According to the World Bank report on migration for 2012, continued strong growth in Russia, supported by high oil prices, has underpinned buoyant remittances from migrants in Russia to their families in Tajikistan and Ukraine.

Remittances from migrants account for a half of Tajikistan's gross domestic product and a third of Kyrgyzstan's one.

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