

One Man's Fight Against Slavs-Only Apartment Rentals in Moscow

"You have to solve this problem. Otherwise, I will sue, no matter how much it costs me."

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Alexander Ryumin / TASS

The threat was typed in a fit of rage, an emotional outburst that spilled forth after weeks of frustration.

"You have to solve this problem," Emil Allakhverdiev demanded in a viral Facebook post last month. "Otherwise, I will sue, no matter how much it costs me."

Allakhverdiev, 26, was directing his public frustration at Yandex, Avito and the Center for Real Estate Information and Analytics (CIAN), among other Russian apartment rental companies. Hunting online for an apartment in his native Moscow, the English teacher of Azerbaijani

descent had run into a ubiquitous fixture: disclaimers that apartments will be rented to ethnic Slavs only.

The practice, aimed squarely at Central Asian immigrants, is one that Russian human rights advocates say has been prevalent in the capital for as long as they can remember. And because it is so entrenched, even Allakhverdiev's singular Facebook post, they say, represents a step in the right direction.

"It feels like a new moment," Alexander Verkhovsky, the director of the Moscow-based SOVA Center, which tracks nationalism and xenophobia in Russia, told The Moscow Times.

"Battling against discrimination requires citizens to be active and lawyers who will litigate strategically and attract media attention."

Although Allakhverdiev has yet to follow through on his threat to sue, he has forced the issue under Russia's media spotlight. Before speaking to The Moscow Times, he shuttled between appearances on the state-run Moskva 24 channel and the independent Dozhd TV network.

"My primary aim is to bring attention to this problem," he explained in a central Moscow cafe one recent evening.

Before setting out on his apartment search three months earlier, Allakhverdiev lived with his mother and rented from a friend. Previously, he hadn't encountered much racism in Moscow, but the search, he said, had shown him how common it really is.

"It's not just the disclaimers that you see in one out of every three ads," Allakhverdiev said. "It's also the real estate agents who, after hearing your last name, just hang up the phone."

In a phone interview, Roman Babichev, who heads the leasing department of the Moscow-based Azbuka Zhilya real estate agency, defended the practice. The goal, he said, is less about keeping apartments in the hands of ethnic Slavs than it is preventing migrant workers from Central Asia and southern Russian republics from turning apartments into "hostels."

"It's not discrimination," Babichev argued. "People who come from Central Asia, from the Caucasus, from Chechnya and Dagestan" — two predominantly Muslim Russian republics — "will say they will only have three people living in the apartment, but soon 10, 12 people have moved in."

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"This is based on years of experience," he added.

Migrant workers from struggling former Soviet republics have long flocked to Russia in search of better wages to send back home. More than a third of Tajikistan's GDP in 2015, for instance, was earned by workers abroad, 90 percent of which [came](#) from Russia. In 2017, authorities [estimated](#) that there were about 10 million foreign laborers in the country.

Last spring, Russian researchers at the Robustory data journalism blog [found](#) that roughly 16 percent of the ads on CIAN discriminated on the basis of ethnicity or nationality. In their [report](#), the researchers laid out the ads with disclaimers in map form, showing users

where it would be easiest to find an apartment.

"This discrimination is not a secret to anyone who lives in Moscow," Vladimir Avetyan, one of Robustory's researchers, said in a phone interview. "What we wanted to do was to visualize it so that the phenomenon would not just be discussed anecdotally."

Eva Mizrabekyan, 46, was born in Azerbaijan and moved to Moscow in the late '90s when her Armenian husband found work at a restaurant. In a phone interview, she said she dreaded when the time would come for the couple to find a new apartment.

"My husband is light-skinned, so sometimes we wouldn't have any problems right away if he went to see the apartment alone," Mizrabekyan said. "But when it was time to sign the agreement the landlord would find out our name and start cursing and would either try to raise the price or back out altogether."

"Thank God we found a nice landlord, and for the past seven years we haven't had to move," she added.

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In a statement to [Dozhd TV](#) regarding Allakhverdiev's complaint, CIAN defended the disclaimers on its website.

"Such ads do indeed exist just as, for example, there are disclaimers on ads that say the apartment is 'only for married couples' or for those 'without children' or 'without animals,'" the company said. "These disclaimers save our users time."

The company also pointed to Russian law, noting that, while it is clear on employment discrimination, for example, it does not "restrict renters in how they want to manage their private property."

Pavel Chikov, director of the Agora human rights organization, says that the practice is illegal. "The Russian constitution says that you cannot discriminate against people because of their race or ethnicity," he said.

Verkhovsky of the SOVA Center, however, disagrees. Discrimination according to Russian law, he said, is the barring of someone from their rights. "Nowhere in our law," he explained, "does it say that it's a person's right to be rented an apartment from another person."

Regardless, to fight the issue, he continued, will require people like Allakhverdiev to demand that discrimination be more thoroughly considered in the courts.

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Several days after the interview at the cafe, Allakhverdiev told The Moscow Times that his Facebook post had been removed for containing "open aggression against people on racial, national and religious grounds as well as ethnicity, sexual orientation, gender identity and disability."

The social media platform's algorithm that removes posts had been hijacked by Russian nationalists sending in complaints, Allakhverdiev suggested. Facebook did not respond to The Moscow Times' requests for comment.

Allakhverdiev also shared screenshots of comments on his original post and messages in his inbox from Russians urging him to leave the country. All of it had made him "want to throw my hands up in the air."

But it wasn't all negative. Others had reached out, too, including some offering him their apartments, and a human rights lawyer who suggested Allakhverdiev file a formal complaint to the Moscow's prosecutor's office as an intermediary step before suing. And going to court, Allakhverdiev said, remained an option.

Still, the stream of hate seemed to have taken its toll.

"I am a Russian citizen and Moscow is my home," he said. "Now it doesn't feel like it so much anymore."

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