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Russia Proposes Foreigner Residence Permit Overhaul

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Russia has suffered a migrant labor shortage since the Covid-19 pandemic prompted many foreign workers to return to their home countries. **Kirill Zykov / Moskva News Agency**

Russia's Interior Ministry has prepared a bill calling for major changes in how residence permits are issued to migrant workers.

The bill, which is still in development, would replace the existing system of three-year temporary residence permits with a three-tier scheme. It would allow foreign citizens to receive permits for short-term (less than 90 days in one calendar year), long-term (over 90 days in one calendar year without the right to permanent residency), or permanent residency.

Under the proposed rules, migrants would be issued a "unified document" containing an electronic chip. The document, which would be valid for a 10-year term, would establish a migrant's identity and grant access to digital "government, banking and other services," including via online state services portal Gosuslugi.

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Migrants would also be allowed to change the declared purpose of their visit to Russia without leaving the country as is the current requirement.

The law's purpose, as stated in its introductory note, is "to ensure a migration situation that serves the interests of the Russian Federation."

Russia has suffered a migrant labor shortage since the Covid-19 pandemic prompted many foreign workers to return to their home countries, hitting industries like construction and agriculture in particular. As many as half of all migrants — up to 5 million — left the country in 2020, according to Interior Ministry estimates.

The government is "actively discussing" ways to simplify entry procedures and ease the labor deficit, Kremlin spokesman Dmitry Peskov told journalists in February.

The shortage of farm laborers has become so acute that the government has reportedly discussed chartering trains to bring in workers.

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Migrants remaining in Russia have struggled under Covid-19 restrictions, with uncertainty over whether their visas will be renewed and many unable to receive QR codes that are increasingly needed to visit restaurants, gyms and other public spaces in Moscow and elsewhere.

As Moscow and several other regions make vaccination compulsory for service workers, business leaders have called for the government to lift restrictions on vaccination of foreign citizens, with many urging that it be made available to them at no cost. Speaking to The Moscow Times last month, a representative of fast-food delivery service Delivery Club said vaccinating migrant workers should be a priority.

"Moscow authorities have excluded migrants from being able to get vaccinated free of charge, while they are also making a vaccination certificate mandatory in order to carry on working. Vaccination should be free for everyone — because the fight against the pandemic concerns everyone, not just certain citizens."

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