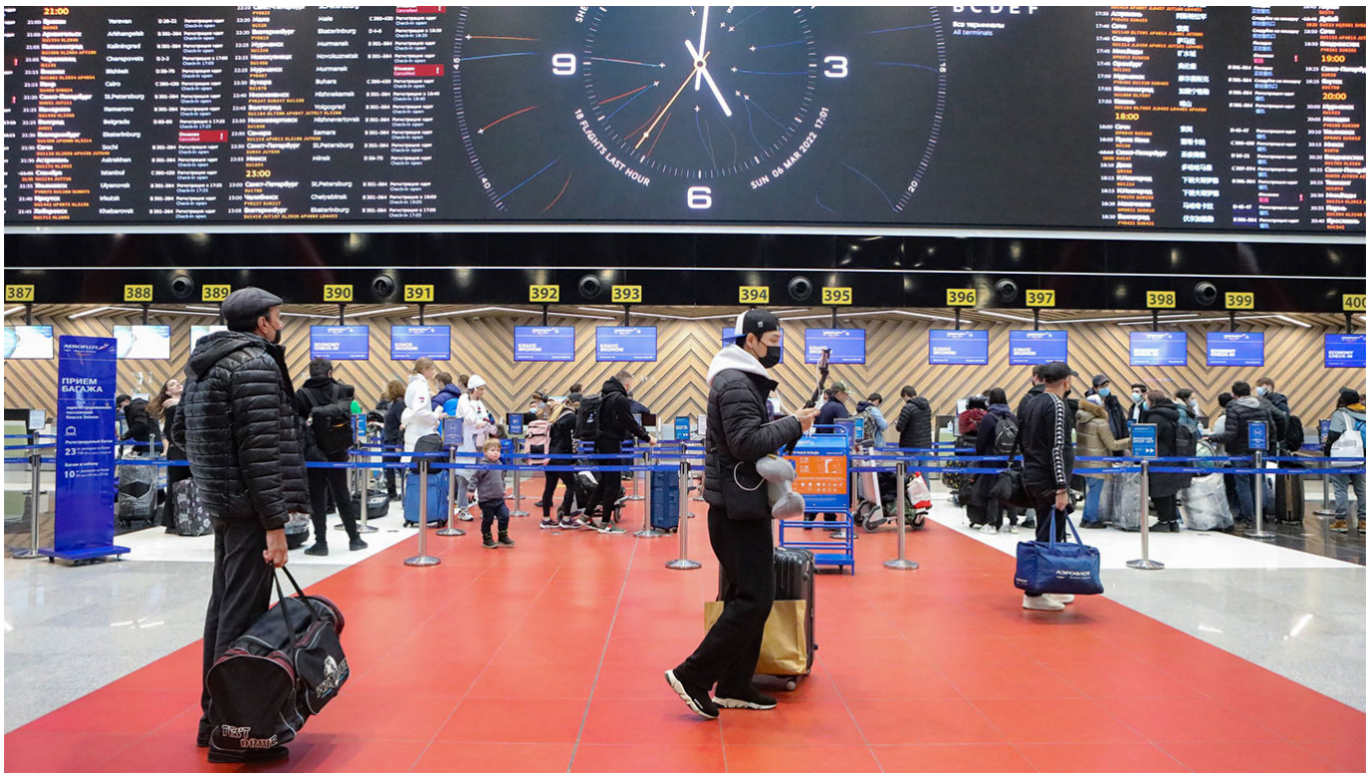
The Moscow Times
30 YEARS
INDEPENDENT NEWS FROM RUSSIA

Russia Depends on Migrants. Moscow Terror Attack Could Inspire New Wave of Hate

By Bektour Iskender

March 26, 2024



People from Central Asia at Moscow Sheremetyevo Airport. **Sophia Sandurskaya / Moskva News Agency**

I remember the first time I entered Russia back in 2012 very distinctly. I traveled from my hometown of Bishkek, Kyrgyzstan, to Moscow to attend a three-day conference organized by Google's Russian office.

Given the short duration of my trip, I opted to travel light, relying solely on a backpack to carry my essentials. This is what caught the attention of the Russian customs official.

Having cleared border control and nearly made my way through the green corridor of Sheremetyevo airport, a man in uniform suddenly stopped me. He directed me through a maze of passages marked with “staff only” signs, until I found myself in a small room with

four other travelers from Central Asia. Together we were a microcosm of the migration demographics of our region: two men from Uzbekistan, one from Tajikistan, and my compatriot from Kyrgyzstan.

And so, we waited. Each passing minute stretched into what felt like an eternity. After about an hour, a group of customs officers along with a plainclothes official, entered the room. They inspected our belongings, meticulously checking each item one by one.

“Why are you traveling with just a backpack?” inquired one of the uniformed officials. My explanation appeared to catch him off guard. He proceeded to explain that my minimal luggage raised red flags, suggesting that I could be smuggling drugs.

“Your people usually travel with huge bags, which is why you seem suspicious,” he remarked bluntly, not caring about the racist undertones in his words.

Before my trip to Moscow, I had heard numerous stories about the mistreatment of Central Asians like myself. A firm rule within my family was to steer clear of the city at all costs, fueled by chilling accounts of racial animosity, police intimidation, and the harrowing specter of neo-Nazi violence.

Despite my hopes that these stories were exaggerated, my experience upon arriving at Sheremetyevo airport quickly showed they were not. It became clear that for Central Asians in Russia’s capital, threats wait behind every corner.

What appalled me most was not merely the necessity of an additional customs check — such inconveniences are commonplace at airports worldwide. Rather, it was the blatant racial profiling perpetrated by the customs officials.

Related article: How Moscow Terror Attack Exposes the Farce of Russia’s ‘Security Theater'

Discrimination against Central Asian migrants is an everyday reality in Russia. Yet events such as the recent attack on Crocus City Hall have the potential to exacerbate the already hostile environment and spark new waves of violence. After a suicide bomber attacked the St. Petersburg metro in 2013, racism against Central Asian migrants rose sharply.

The suspects in the attack need not even be of Central Asian descent to stoke the flames of hate. Any person of color from Central Asia, the Caucasus, or one of Russia’s ethnic republics, regardless of whether their guilt is proven or not, can be scapegoated to justify aggressive actions against the broad category of people Russians derogatorily label as “nerussky” or “nerus'” — terms that translate as “non-Russians.”

Following the Crocus City Hall attacks, one of the initial reports that caught my attention stirred memories of my first visit to Moscow: migrants from Kyrgyzstan told RFE/RL journalists they had been detained at Sheremetyevo Airport for a staggering two days.

A quote from one of the migrants, speaking to RFE/RL on Sunday, encapsulates the profound sense of hopelessness experienced by Central Asian migrants:

“We flew in from Bishkek yesterday and arrived at Sheremetyevo at 18:40 Moscow time. Here

they collected our passports and took us to some room. They checked our phones for four hours and wouldn't give them back. They took our fingerprints and made us sign some papers. Ukrainians and Tajiks are getting beaten up. We've been sitting here hungry for a day, they didn't even give us water.

“They've locked us up like criminals in a room, there are more than 10 Kyrgyzstanis in one room, and there are others in different rooms. At first, they said it was 'additional checks,' but then they stopped explaining anything at all. We contacted the embassy, they told us they couldn't help us with anything.”

These words encapsulate the horrors people from Central Asia face in Russia: the brutality of the Russian state, fears of physical violence, and the stark realization that even your own government cannot offer any assistance.

For many people from Central Asia, the situation feels like a relentless trap. Escaping the pull of migration to Russia is no simple feat. Central Asian countries lead in migration to Russia, with millions from Uzbekistan, Tajikistan, Kyrgyzstan, and Kazakhstan laboring and settling in what was once our colonial metropole.

In my youth, I was fortunate to secure a decent job in my homeland. Growing up in Bishkek afforded me certain privileges through my education and connections. However, for most young people in my country, lucrative job opportunities are scarce. Finding work abroad is the sole avenue for supporting their families. Yet the options for where to migrate are disappointingly limited.

The United States is too distant, the European Union and China present a formidable barrier with their strict visa policies. Russia, despite its problems, is the best option many of them have.

Related article: Kyrgyzstan Is Copying Russia’s Dictatorship. I Fear It Could Get Worse

Paradoxically, Russia relies heavily on Central Asian migrants. On one hand, they supply Russia with much-needed labor. Yet on the other, they deepen Central Asian countries' dependence on the Kremlin, thereby facilitating Moscow's ability to bolster its political influence in the region.

Hence, Russia's policy towards Central Asian migration is rife with contradictions. While citizens of Central Asian republics can easily relocate to Russia, the Russian state invariably relegates them to second-class status through systemic discrimination and racial profiling.

Statistics indicate that many Central Asian migrants would opt out of working in Russia if given the opportunity. In 2022, the International Organization for Migration conducted research on returning migrants in Kyrgyzstan. Although over 80% had previously resided in Russia, 44% said they would have preferred to stay in Kyrgyzstan permanently. Additionally, one-third indicated that even if they were to migrate again, they would favor destinations other than Russia, with Germany, the U.S., Turkey, and Korea topping the list.

I always sensed this sentiment whenever I encountered fellow Kyrgyz people in Moscow.

During the same trip in 2012, I crossed paths with a friend from Kyrgyzstan who was then working at Google and attending the same conference. Following the event, he invited me to join him for lunch at Google's Moscow office to discuss ideas for localizing Google services in Central Asian languages.

Upon our arrival, we quickly realized that the woman serving food in the canteen was also from Kyrgyzstan. Her delight at discovering our shared nationality was palpable, prompting her to usher us into the kitchen, where we found everyone was from Kyrgyzstan as well. Our brief conversation with the kitchen team left them visibly elated. They were thrilled to encounter fellow compatriots, clearly homesick yet hungry for news of success and breakthroughs by people from Kyrgyzstan.

As we finished our lunch, one of the employees said the words that will stay with me forever, “You've brought us such joy today, you were the first Kyrgyz visitors to the other side of the canteen.” Usually, my countrymen only came in to work in the kitchen.

I wish for a future where people from my region don't have to endure discrimination abroad. I am grateful to people who tirelessly cultivate local businesses, seek foreign investments, and confront the corruption that impedes our economic growth.

I hope other countries will become more welcoming to Central Asian immigrants or develop stronger ties with our entrepreneurs. This benefits everyone: it will make Russia less reliant on cheap Central Asian labor, and weaken the Kremlin’s grip over the region.

But this journey will take time. Until then, people from my part of the world will have to go to Russia, living in constant fear.

The views expressed in opinion pieces do not necessarily reflect the position of The Moscow Times.

Original url:
https://www.themoscowtimes.com/2024/03/26/russia-depends-on-migrants-moscow-terror-attack-could-inspire-new-wave-of-hate-a84622