

## RUSSIA'S MIGRATION POLICY: BARRIERS AND PROHIBITIONS FOR LABOR MIGRANT WORKERS

## МІГРАЦІЙНА ПОЛІТИКА РОСІЇ: БАР'ЄРИ ТА ЗАБОРОНИ ДЛЯ ТРУДОВИХ МІГРАНТІВ

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**Abstract.** *This article examines the complex set of legal, administrative, digital, and economic barriers that shape a discriminatory environment for labor migrants in the Russian Federation. Particular attention is given to the role of the state not as a guarantor of rights, but as a source of systemic restrictions designed to produce a vulnerable and dependent workforce. The analysis focuses on formal prohibitions on certain types of employment; limited access to healthcare, education, housing rights, and family life; as well as economic instruments of pressure — quotas, rising patent fees, and regional and temporal limitations on residence and work. The article also explores emerging mechanisms of digital surveillance, including the proposed mandatory registration of migrants via a mobile application that collects geolocation and biometric data, and the inclusion of individuals in a “registry of monitored persons” as a form of administrative control. The author argues that these restrictions constitute an integrated system of “managed dependency” that deepens social marginalization and hinders the integration of migrants. The article further situates these developments within the broader political and ideological context of Russia’s increasingly restrictive migration policy, highlighting its contradictions with the Constitution of the Russian Federation and international human rights standards. The conclusion emphasizes the need to acknowledge the discriminatory nature of the current policy regime and to revise approaches to labor migration governance in line with the principles of non-discrimination, legal equality, and human dignity.*

**Keywords:** labor migrants, Central Asia; rights/(lack of rights) of migrants; discriminatory practices; migration policy; managed dependence; social marginalization; Russian Federation; human rights.

**Анотація.** У цій статті розглядається комплекс правових, адміністративних, цифрових та економічних бар'єрів, що формують дискримінаційне середовище для трудових мігрантів у Російській Федерації. Особлива увага приділяється ролі держави не як гаранта прав, а як джерела системних обмежень, спрямованих на створення вразливої та залежної робочої сили. Аналіз зосереджується на формальних заборонах на певні види зайнятості; обмеженому доступі до охорони здоров'я, освіти, права на житло та сімейного життя; а також на економічних інструментах тиску — квотах, підвищенні патентних зборів та регіональних і тимчасових обмеженнях на проживання та роботу. У статті також досліджуються нові механізми цифрового спостереження, зокрема запропонована обов'язкова реєстрація мігрантів за допомогою мобільного додатку, що збирає геолокаційні та біометричні дані, а також включення осіб до «реєстру осіб, що перебувають під наглядом» як форма адміністративного контролю. Автор стверджує, що ці обмеження становлять

*інтегровану систему «керованої залежності», яка поглиблює соціальну маргіналізацію та перешкоджає інтеграції мігрантів. Далі в статті ці події розглядаються в ширшому політичному та ідеологічному контексті дедалі більш обмежувальної міграційної політики Росії, підкреслюючи її суперечності з Конституцією Російської Федерації та міжнародними стандартами у сфері прав людини. У висновку наголошується на необхідності визнання дискримінаційного характеру чинної політичної системи та перегляду підходів до регулювання трудової міграції відповідно до принципів недискримінації, юридичної рівності та людської гідності.*

**Ключові слова:** *трудові мігранти, Центральна Азія; права/(відсутність прав) мігрантів; дискримінаційні практики; міграційна політика; керована залежність; соціальна маргіналізація; Російська Федерація; права людини.*

**Introduction.** In recent years, the migration policy of the Russian Federation has demonstrated a persistent trend toward strengthening restrictive and control mechanisms concerning labor migrants, primarily those originating from Central Asian countries. Although migrants traditionally occupy socially and economically vulnerable positions in the Russian labor market, the tightening of migration regulations became especially pronounced after 2014. This period was characterized by changes in the country's foreign policy course, intensified internal ideological control, and the state's efforts to mobilize the population amid growing socio-economic difficulties. Overall, the share of migrants from Central Asian countries remains high, despite the fact that before 2014 a significant portion of foreign labor migrants in Russia were Ukrainian citizens. As of February 2, 2014, approximately 1.6 million Ukrainian citizens resided in Russia, of whom around 1.0 – 1.1 million were labor migrants [e-ir.info, (2017)]. Citizens of Uzbekistan account for approximately 55.4% of the total number of labor migrants, while citizens of Tajikistan comprise around 39.89%. The total number of Central Asian citizens (Uzbekistan, Tajikistan, Kyrgyzstan, Kazakhstan, Turkmenistan) residing in Russia is estimated at roughly 4 million, continuing to play a key role in meeting the needs of the Russian labor market.

Political events, including the annexation of Crimea and military actions in Donbas, as well as worsening living conditions, led to a mass outflow of Ukrainian migrants, despite simplified procedures for obtaining residence permits or citizenship for some of them. Today, the share of Ukrainian labor migrants in Russia has been virtually reduced to zero.

Modern migration policy in Russia exhibits a selective and ethnically asymmetric character: control measures and legal restrictions predominantly affect Central Asian migrants, reinforcing their vulnerable position and highlighting institutional constraints that limit the rights and opportunities of foreign workers.

Previous research, including the author's own studies, has identified the formation of a stable model of institutional discrimination, manifested in selective law enforcement, limitations on migrants' access to legal protection mechanisms, as well as social and media stigmatization. In public discourse, the figure of the labor migrant often substitutes for the systemic causes of economic and social problems, becoming an object of political and propagandistic instrumentalization.

Since 2022 — in the context of Russia's full-scale armed aggression against Ukraine and the ensuing internal mobilization — migration control measures have been significantly intensified. State initiatives in this sphere have taken an overtly repressive form: the powers of law-enforcement agencies were expanded, residence regulations tightened, and the number of inspections, deportations, and refusals to renew residence and work permits increased [A. Kubal (2016); Ivanchak & Palkina (2017); F. Khonkhodzhaev (2019); C. Schenk (2023)]. Importantly, these policies are being implemented despite the persistent labor shortage in key sectors of the Russian economy, underscoring the contradictory and ideologically driven nature of the measures applied.

**Research Aim and Objectives.** The aim of this study is to analyze the institutional constraints imposed on labor migrants in Russia and to assess their influence on shaping the overall character of the state's migration policy.

The objectives of the study are as follows:

1. To identify the key institutional constraints applied to labor migrants in Russia;
2. To classify these constraints according to their legal, administrative, and socio-economic nature;
3. To examine the regulatory and legal framework governing labor migration in order to identify barrier-based and prohibitive mechanisms;
4. To determine the role of institutional barriers in shaping the overarching character of Russia's migration policy.

**Methodology and Limitations.** The study employs a mixed-methods approach that combines both qualitative and quantitative research techniques. The primary empirical component consists of a survey conducted among more than 300 labor migrants across various regions of Russia, including Moscow, Saint Petersburg, Moscow and Kaluga Oblasts, Leningrad Oblast, and the city of Samara. The sample also includes former and current labor migrants from Tajikistan originating from the cities of Isfara, Khujand, Konibodom, and Asht. Initially, the surveys were administered online via messaging applications (WhatsApp and Telegram). However, some respondents expressed concerns about answering questions through these platforms due to the perceived possibility of device monitoring. To obtain more reliable information, audio calls were used, allowing for clarification of responses and creating a safer and more comfortable environment for participants. In addition, the study draws on an analysis of media publications, academic journals, scholarly works by colleagues, official government sources, and statistical reports.

**Research Limitations.** The survey primarily targeted migrants from Central Asian countries, which may limit the generalizability of the findings to migrants from other regions or categories. Furthermore, respondents' caution—stemming from heightened surveillance and control over their communications—may have affected the completeness and accuracy of the information they provided.

**State of Research.** Studies on Russia's migration policy and the situation of labor migrants in recent years have been marked by a notable shift in scholarly and expert attention toward descriptive-normative and applied tasks. The majority of publications focus on issues of migrant adaptation, the legal regulation of labor migration, socio-demographic trends, and the economic effects of migration flows.

At the same time, critical engagement with the institutional practices of the state aimed at tightening migration control and restricting migrants' rights remains significantly underdeveloped in the Russian academic literature.

This situation is largely shaped by the characteristics of the contemporary academic environment, in which migration research is closely intertwined with the political and ideological priorities of the state. After 2014 — and especially after 2022 — public and expert discourse increasingly framed migration primarily as an object of governance and a potential threat. This dynamic has narrowed the space for independent and critical inquiry. Scholarly publications in this field typically avoid assessing the repressive aspects of migration policy, instead focusing on issues such as the “optimization of regulation,” “enhancing the effectiveness of control,” and “the integration of migrants into the host society” [Florinskaya 2021; Kozlov 2020]. As a result, the problem of institutional discrimination and legal restrictions affecting labor migrants remains insufficiently explored. Works that attempt to analyze the socio-political foundations and ideological mechanisms of migration policy appear only sporadically and are more often published outside the official academic sphere — in independent expert outlets, analytical reports, and international studies [HRW Report (2023); Migration Governance Snapshot: The Russian Federation, Geneva: IOM, (2022)].

Thus, the degree of scholarly development of this issue can be characterized as fragmented and constrained by the boundaries of permissible academic discourse. The absence of critical analysis of the state's institutional practices toward migrants creates a significant gap in understanding the

actual mechanisms through which migration policy operates and the ways in which it shapes the social structure of Russian society.

**The Stage of Institutionalization of Migration Control (2014–2025).** Whereas in the 2000s Russia's migration policy was shaped by a liberal-economic logic—one that viewed migration as a mechanism to offset demographic decline and support economic growth—starting from 2014 it entered a phase of systematic control and the narrowing of migrants' rights. The turning point was marked by the events surrounding the annexation of Crimea, subsequent international isolation, and intensified domestic ideological mobilization.

From this period onward, Russia's state migration policy has evolved into a system of institutionalized restrictions on the rights of labor migrants. The grounds for refusing the issuance or renewal of residence and work permits were expanded, the number of deportations increased (see Table 2), and police raids in migrant living areas became part of routine enforcement practices. Although formally justified as efforts to “restore order,” these measures were in practice accompanied by legal arbitrariness and the proliferation of corruption.

The period from 2014 to 2025 can be characterized as a transition from selective tolerance to institutionalized control. In the absence of a coherent integration strategy, labor migrants continued to constitute a significant and economically indispensable segment of the workforce, yet their legal and social status became increasingly marginalized.

Our research demonstrates how the first Russian migration Concept — adopted in 2003 under the title “Concept for the Regulation of Migration Processes in the Russian Federation” — which initially prioritized the attraction of “compatriots” (defined broadly as individuals born in the former Soviet republics) and facilitated their voluntary resettlement to Russia, gradually transformed in the opposite direction: into a mechanism of managed dependency.

The current policy framework is aimed at institutionalizing a rotational, short-term model of labor migration, in which foreign workers arrive for limited periods, without families, with no prospects for integration into Russian society, and with restricted access for their children to the educational system.

One of the most illustrative manifestations of this trend has been the tightening of regulations governing the residence and social integration of labor migrants' families. At the official level, Russian authorities increasingly emphasize the need to restrict the entry of migrants with children, justifying such measures with references to “adaptation challenges” and the need to “improve the quality of education.” In several regions, additional barriers have been introduced for the enrollment of migrant children in schools, including examinations even for six-year-olds applying to the first grade. According to official data, in 2025 approximately 87.4% of migrant children were not admitted to general educational institutions: out of 23,616 submitted applications, only 12.6% (2,964 children) were accepted, while the rest were denied admission [Rosobrnadzor (2025)]. More than 80% of the applications were rejected at the documentation stage on formal grounds — such as “incomplete paperwork” or “lack of available places.” In practice, these measures solidify a policy of social exclusion and institutionalize inequality between migrant children and Russian citizens.

A natural question arises: why have the authorities progressively tightened migration regulations, particularly regarding citizens of Central Asian countries—Tajikistan, Uzbekistan, and Kyrgyzstan? Analysis indicates that these changes cannot be understood outside of their political context. The intensification of migration policy has become part of a broader strategy of domestic mobilization and the consolidation of authoritarian control, in the context of international isolation resulting from Russia's aggression against Ukraine, the annexation of Crimea, and subsequent economic sanctions. In recent years (2022–2025), Russia adopted three new laws that strengthened migration control — Federal Laws No. 316-FZ (10 July 2023), No. 260-FZ (8 August 2024), and No. 121-FZ (23 May 2025) — and introduced eight amendments to key acts, including No. 115-FZ “On the Legal Status of Foreign Citizens in the Russian Federation” and No. 114-FZ “On the Procedure for Exiting and Entering the Russian Federation” [Consul Group 2023–2025]. These changes affected a wide range of issues, from the tightening of migration registration and digital monitoring to stricter requirements for legalization and obtaining residence permits.

The tightening of legislation has been accompanied by socio-economic and ideological factors. During periods of economic downturn and sanctions-induced pressure, authorities have often used migration as a tool to redirect social discontent, attributing labor market problems to the “excessive presence of foreign workers.” At the same time, the perception of migration as a national security threat has intensified. In official discourse, migrants are increasingly framed not only as labor resources but also as potential sources of extremism and illegal activity. Consequently, the role of law enforcement agencies (the Ministry of Internal Affairs and the FSB) in migration regulation has significantly increased.

Thus, the intensification of migration policy since 2014 forms part of a broader trend toward internal consolidation and enhanced control. Central Asian migrants are positioned not merely as participants in the labor market but also as elements of a politico-symbolic space through which the state conveys notions of order, loyalty, and stability.

A central element in this system is the institution of registration at the place of residence. Formally, it serves as a tool for statistical accounting, but in practice it retains features of the Soviet-era *propiska* — a mechanism of administrative control over population mobility [Gladkikh, M (2019); Blackburn, M (2021)]. Failure to register entails fines, deportations, and entry bans, effectively transforming this mechanism into an instrument that perpetuates the legal vulnerability of migrants [Khonkhodzhaev, F (2019); Demintseva, M. (2017)].

The institutional legacy of the Soviet internal control system has become the foundation of the modern model of “managed dependency” for labor migrants — a system in which their legal status is entirely contingent upon administrative procedures controlled by the state and law enforcement agencies.

Economic mechanisms of restriction have also intensified, including quotas, bans on employment in certain sectors, and increased costs for work permits. These measures make legalization increasingly expensive and inaccessible for many migrants, effectively turning economic pressure into a tool for creating a powerless, dependent, and highly vulnerable labor force, whose role is reduced to performing low-paid and physically demanding work without any social guarantees.

Another direction of tightening has been direct legislative restrictions aimed at gradually reducing the number of legally employed migrants. In 2025, restrictions for foreign workers were introduced in 51 federal subjects of the Russian Federation; in 2024, in 47 subjects; and in 2023, in only 15. These measures include both direct bans on employment in certain sectors and economic levers that render the presence of labor migrants economically disadvantageous.

Our research shows that by 2025, a comprehensive set of regulatory barriers had been established in Russia, including:

- direct prohibitions on employment in specific sectors;
- registration of migrants as “controlled persons”;
- mandatory residence registration (*propiska*);
- reduction of the allowed period of stay from 180 to 90 days per year;
- the introduction of entry bans ranging from 1, 3, 5, to 10 years.

In addition to these measures, the introduction and use of new digital technologies targeting labor migrants has become another example of the expansion of digital surveillance practices and the restriction of their rights and freedoms.

For instance, in 2025, a “Registry of Controlled Persons” was created [Interfax 2025], encompassing foreign nationals under administrative supervision. As of autumn 2025, the Russian Ministry of Internal Affairs’ registry included approximately 772,000 foreign citizens. Inclusion in this registry effectively deprives individuals of basic civil rights: it prohibits marriage registration, obtaining a driver’s license, access to banking services, and the enrollment of children in schools and kindergartens.

Furthermore, starting from 1 September 2025, an experimental digital monitoring system for migrants was launched in Moscow and Moscow Oblast, requiring labor migrants to download a specialized mobile application and register. This system grants state authorities access to their personal data, movements, and employment activities. It should be noted that such measures contravene several provisions of the Russian Constitution, particularly Articles 23, 24, and 27, which guarantee the right to privacy, the confidentiality of personal information, freedom of movement, and the choice of place of residence.

In practice, however, legal and constitutional guarantees in contemporary Russia have largely lost their significance: state institutions systematically disregard both national legislation and international norms that enshrine the rights of migrants. Under these conditions, reliance on legal protection mechanisms becomes largely formal and does not provide genuine safeguarding of labor migrants rights.

Thus, legal, digital, and institutional restrictions constitute an integrated system of control over migrants, with economic instruments serving as an additional means of pressure. The dynamics of work permit costs across Russian regions serve as an indicator of this trend.

Table 1. Dynamics of work permit (advance) costs for labor migrants in Russian regions with high inflows of labor migrants (2020–2025/2026\*).

Region	2020	2021	2022	2023	2024	2025	2026*	Increase,% (2020–2025/2026)	
Moscow	5 350	5 341	5 900	6 600	7 500	8 900	10 000	+66,4 %	+86%
Moscow Region	5 100	5 092	5 900	6 600	7 500	8 900	10 000	+74,5 %	+96,1%
St. Petersburg	4 000	4 000	4 200	4 400	4 600	6 000	8 000	+50 %	+100%
Leningrad Region	4 000	4 000	4 200	4 400	4 600	6 000	8 000	+50 %	+100%
Krasnodar Region	4 351	4 474	5 940	5 810	10 080	17 120	27 000	+293,6%	+ 520%

**Source:** Data from the Department of Economic Policy of Moscow, the Federal Tax Service of the Russian Federation, and regional executive authorities (compiled by the author).

\* The data provided on the cost of a patent for 2026 has already been legislatively approved by the relevant regional authorities and will come into force on January 1, 2026.

The table demonstrates that the increase in work permit (patent) costs for labor migrants from 2020 to 2025 has become a consistent trend. This pattern reflects not only inflationary processes but also the use of economic instruments as a form of administrative control over migration flows, which collectively exacerbates the economic vulnerability of labor migrants.

At the same time, it is important to note that revenues from taxes paid by labor migrants under the work permit system are substantial for regional budgets. In 2024 alone, these revenues exceeded 123 billion rubles ( $\approx$  \$1.33 billion), in 2023 they amounted to 110 billion rubles, and in 2022 they surpassed 100 billion rubles ( $\approx$  \$1.5 billion) [RBC (2025); TASS (2024)].

However, the work permit constitutes only part of the total expenses borne by labor migrants for the legalization of their residence and employment in Russia. In addition to the monthly advance payment for the permit, migrants incur several other mandatory costs. These include: the state fee for issuing the permit; mandatory medical examinations (the costs of which vary by region); registration fees; the purchase of a health insurance policy (for six months or one year); and expenses for obtaining a certificate demonstrating proficiency in the Russian language, as well as knowledge of Russian history and the fundamentals of the legal system.

Collectively, these expenses impose a significant financial burden. According to surveyed migrants, the total annual costs of maintaining legal status can amount to several months' average

wages. Thus, even with formal legal mechanisms for legalization in place, financial barriers render them practically inaccessible for a substantial portion of migrants, making legal status conditional and temporary, maintained at the cost of continuous financial effort.

Moreover, full compliance with formal requirements does not guarantee freedom of movement or protection from arbitrary inspections. According to our field data, regular police raids and informal coercive practices persist, and in some cases are supplemented by youth or quasi-patriotic groups (such as “Russkaya obshina”, “Rusich,” “Imperskiy Legion,” etc.) conducting “raids” against migrants, further intensifying the atmosphere of fear and legal vulnerability.

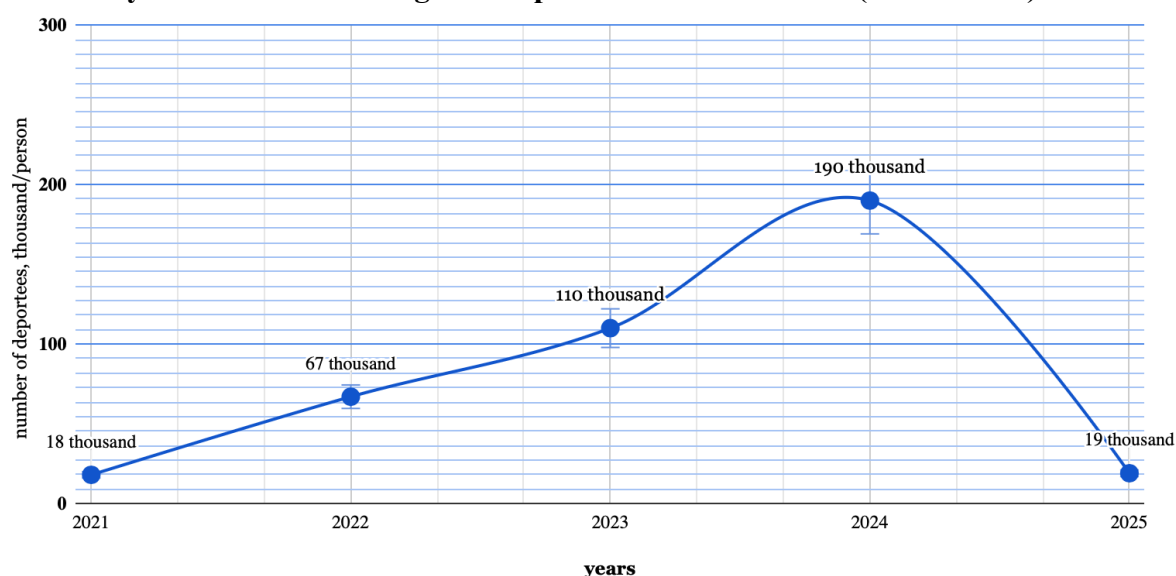
Another restrictive mechanism for labor migrants is the practice of deportations, which in recent years has acquired a systemic and often arbitrary character. Despite the existence of interstate agreements, formal compliance with legislation, and the completion of all legalization procedures by migrants, the number of deportations has increased annually (see Table 2).

In 2025, a sharp decline in deportations was observed; however, this does not indicate that the system has become more fair or humane. According to initiatives supported by the Government Commission on Legislative Activities, the authorities appear to be using the law as a means of pressure to mobilize labor migrants for participation in military operations against Ukraine. Survey results indicate that even labor migrants possessing all necessary documents — including work permits, registration, and other supporting papers — were frequently subjected to expulsion on formal or contrived grounds. In some cases, leaving the house without carrying one of the required documents served as a reason for deportation; subsequent presentation of the documents at a police station was generally disregarded.

Our earlier studies also documented cases of collective judicial proceedings and mass deportations of migrants, predominantly from Central Asian countries, in which decisions were made without proper individual consideration of the circumstances. These practices, observed even before 2021, point to a trend toward the institutionalization of a repressive approach in migration control [Ryazantsev, S. et al. (2021); Akramov, Sh & Khonkhodzhaev, F. (2020)]. Relevant materials and statistical data illustrating the scale of these processes are available in the cited publications by the author.



**Table 2. Dynamics of Labor Migrant Deportations from Russia (2021–2025\*).**



\* As of November 2025, the Ministry of Internal Affairs reported 128,000 violations of migration legislation, while only 19,000 individuals were actually deported. According to draft law initiatives supported by the Government Commission on Legislative Activities, an alternative is provided for the remaining “violators”: either administrative sanctions or the option to enter a military service contract.

**Source:** compiled by the author based on data from the Ministry of Internal Affairs of the Russian Federation.

**Conclusion.** Contemporary migration policy in the Russian Federation exhibits a clear trend toward the institutionalization of restrictive and repressive practices targeting labor migrants. Analysis indicates that migration regulation extends beyond the purely socio-economic domain and acquires a pronounced political dimension. Migrants increasingly find themselves not only as participants in the labor market but also as objects of administrative and foreign-policy instruments. During periods of heightened tension between Russia and the countries of Central Asia, there is a noticeable intensification of migration control, an increase in deportations, and stricter entry restrictions, reflecting the instrumental use of migration policy for political purposes. At the same time, the governments of the labor migrants’ countries of origin — Tajikistan, Uzbekistan, and Kyrgyzstan — are limited in their ability to protect the rights of their citizens abroad due to significant economic, energy, and political dependence on Russia. The absence of a systematic diplomatic response or effective consular support mechanisms further exacerbates migrants’ vulnerability, reinforcing their status as a dependent and unprotected social group. Thus, Russian migration policy not only creates an internal system of social inequality but also reflects the characteristics of the post-Soviet regional hierarchy, where labor mobility becomes part of the political geometry of power.

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