

In Czech Republic, Russians Are Back and Thriving

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A downtown Prague shop selling nesting dolls. "You wouldn't find here any billionaires like in Britain," says Anna Chlebina, editor of the Russian Word. **Petr David Josek**

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PRAGUE — The Russians are back.

Twenty years after Soviet troops left to the delight of a liberated nation, Russian schools, businesses, newspapers and communities are thriving in and around Prague.

But while many Czechs seem to be leaving decades of bad blood behind them, there's alarm in Russia at the economic impact of a new wave of middle-class immigration to Eastern Europe, where life seems far simpler and where EU membership brings dynamism.

"Private property rights are questioned every day. It's an awful business environment here [in

Russia]. There is even a danger for people's freedom," opposition leader Mikhail Kasyanov said in an interview.

Statistics reveal a deep loss of confidence in Russia among foreigners and Russians alike. In the first five months of this year, net capital outflow from Russia hit a staggering \$35 billion, which even the government admits is due to a highly unfavorable investment climate.

Some of that money is finding a new home in countries like the Czech Republic, and many newcomers plan on staying for the foreseeable future. Kasyanov — a former prime minister — said Slovakia, Bulgaria and the Baltic states Latvia and Estonia are also proving popular as Russians seek destinations cheaper than London or New York.

"Don't return!" was the advice given to 20-year-old Valeria Tarhanova by her parents. She left the city of Krasnoyarsk in central Siberia to study at a hotel business school in Prague.

"I'll stay here and hope to work possibly in a hotel," she said in solid Czech. "I don't know what to do in Russia. There are no jobs and life's much worse."

But Boris Pankin, a foreign minister under Mikhail Gorbachev, considers the Russian exodus a source of pride.

"It's exactly what we were fighting for during perestroika," Pankin said in an interview this week in Prague, where he was attending a conference looking back at the fall of communism. "It is a very important achievement — a right for people to leave whenever they would like to leave. I welcome it."

The armies of five Warsaw Pact countries — the Soviet Union, Poland, Hungary, Bulgaria and East Germany — invaded then-Czechoslovakia in 1968 to crush the Prague Spring, the extraordinary flourishing of personal and artistic freedoms ushered in by leader Alexander Dubcek's reforms.

Almost overnight, the brutal crackdown turned Czechoslovakia into one of the most hard-line regimes behind the Iron Curtain, killing the dreams of an entire generation, poisoning life with fear and sending dissidents to prison. At least 108 people were killed by Soviet troops in 1968, dozens of others in following years.

The Velvet Revolution led by Vaclav Havel brought communism to an end in 1989. Two years later the last of 75,000 troops departed.

Many Czechs — especially the younger generations — have moved on.

"I don't consider it a problem. To be honest, I just don't think much about it," said Katerina Heilmann, a 32-year-old Prague translator. "But I read about the Russian mafia operating here, and that's a cause for concern."

Czech officials say more than 30,000 Russians have residency permits, although the real number is considered much higher. There are almost four times as many Ukrainians. Like Russia, Ukraine also suffers from systemic corruption and a stifling bureaucracy, and the nation was devastated by the global financial crisis.

A survey conducted in June by the Russian Public Opinion Research Center showed that 39 percent of Russians aged 18 to 24 would like to leave the country. The polling agency surveyed 1,600 people in 138 cities and towns across Russia on June 4-5. The margin of error was 3.4 percent.

Russian immigration to the Czech Republic dates back to the 1917 Revolution when some 30,000 people fled.

"They all settled here well," said Milan Pospisil, of the Czech Government Council for National Minorities. "It's not a serious problem for them to understand the language."

For years, Russia's mega-rich have been setting up residence in Britain and sending their children to British schools. The new wave to Eastern Europe, though, has a very different feel.

"You wouldn't find here any billionaires like in Britain," said Anna Chlebina, editor-in-chief of the Russian Word, a monthly magazine released in Prague. She has settled with her husband and 5-year-old daughter in what she calls a "more predictable country where trams go on schedule."

She said many families with boys simply leave to avoid conscription: "For a common person, it's a huge problem to do military service in Russia."

Alexander Barabanov, a 30-year-old businessman and chairman of the Association of Russian-speaking Youth in the Czech Republic, revels in his personal freedom.

"It's quiet here," said Barabanov, who came to Prague in 1999 to study medicine before switching to business. "You don't have to worry that one day your offices could be raided by policemen with Kalashnikovs."

Roman Avanesian, the Armenian co-owner of the Arbat store, which sells Russian products including caviar, vodka and DVDs, said he was attracted to the country by the peaceful way in which then-Czechoslovakia separated peacefully into two nations in 1993.

"The Czech Republic and Slovakia are probably the only two nations in the world that are able to split in such a way," he said, reflecting on his last home in the North Caucasus.

"I know very well what it means when nations start to fight each other."

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