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INDEPENDENT NEWS FROM RUSSIA

Teens Vie for All-Expenses-Paid Trip to U.S.

By Jonathan Earle

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Teenagers applying Sunday at a Moscow school to study under the FLEX program for a year in the United States. **Igor Tabakov**

Editor's note: This is the first in a series.

One year from now, Pasha Kormiletsyn could find himself studying at an American high school, sitting around an American dinner table or playing football — American football — in a town like Bozeman, Montana; Willis Point, Texas; or Morrisdale, Pennsylvania.

He might come back to Russia with a Southern drawl. Or a cowboy hat. But he would certainly

return with a new perspective.

"It's a chance to fundamentally change my life," Pasha said as he joined about 800 other teens in a Moscow schoolhouse to participate in the first step of the application process for the U.S. government-funded FLEX program, which began for Muscovites on Sunday.

About 240 teenagers from across the country will make the cut to spend a school year abroad, living with American host families, attending high school and participating in community life. The teens are an elite sample of the first post-Soviet generation, and the things they bring back could very well change Russia.

The more than 7,300 Russians who have graduated from FLEX, which will mark 20 years in Russia and the former Soviet Union next year, have brought their experience and language skills to leadership positions in business, government and elsewhere. Their commitment to building a more prosperous and equitable society has touched many and, as they mature, their influence is certain to grow.

Over the next two years, The Moscow Times will be following the selection process and later the winners as they settle into their new lives in America, cope with separation from home and analyze their experiences. We also will meet with alumni to see what impact they have made on their communities.

For Pasha and other applicants to the 2012-13 pool, the long journey started in school classrooms in 50 cities across Russia, where workers and volunteers from the American Councils for International Education — the nonprofit organization that operates FLEX on behalf of the U.S. State Department's Bureau of Education and Cultural Affairs — first tested their basic knowledge of English. So it happened that applicants from Moscow and nearby regions found themselves lining up outside a squat, beige building on a gray Sunday afternoon.

They were ushered inside in groups of 15 and 20, eager to begin the competition and find out how they measured up to "American" standards. Seeing their faces, Yekaterina Kazakova, a program graduate volunteering at the test center, said, "I want to be them again. I want to go back." The logo printed on her blue T-shirt spelled out the FLEX acronym: "Future Leaders Exchange."

Last year, less than 2 percent of the 740 high school students who passed through this test center got a spot in the program. Harvard University's acceptance rate is three times higher. And just like getting into an elite U.S. college, acceptance to FLEX is an inexact science, with organizers looking for a particular set of character traits.

"We select the ones we think will be most able to adapt to a new culture, be part of a host family and talk about their own culture," said Matthew Mulherin, who oversees the selection process for the American Councils.

To get the scholarship, applicants must pass three rounds of testing — each more rigorous than the last. On Sunday, the applicants — 14 to 16 year olds — took a 15-minute, 16-question English comprehension test. A third of them will move on to the second round, a standardized English proficiency test and three written essays. Those who make it to the third round —

semifinalists — will face two more essays, an interview and a formal application. The winners of the competition will be announced in early April.

"I'll always remember getting that phone call," said Ksenia Semyonova, a 2002 graduate. "I figured I wouldn't get it because everything is corrupt in Russia."

Mulherin said the program offers many students their first glimpse of a "major, high-integrity process," meaning there's no cheating and no currying favor. It's pure merit, he said.

The United States' image might have suffered during the 2000s "war on terror" and the 2008 financial crisis, but the word "America" still inspired many at the test center Sunday.

"America is a country of possibilities. America beckons," said Yekaterina Volodicheva, who waited in near-freezing temperatures for her daughter, Yelizaveta, to finish the test. The two came all the way from Kaluga, 140 kilometers southwest of Moscow, for Yelizaveta take the test for a second year in a row.

Volodicheva said the chance to go to America had inspired her daughter to study Russian folklore and history. "She said, 'What will I tell the Americans?'" Volodicheva recalled. Part of the student exchange requires the Russian teens to prepare presentations in which they share their culture with their American classmates.

Like many parents, Volodicheva wasn't thrilled about sending her daughter away for a year. "But how can you put a stick in the spokes of a child's enthusiasm?" she said.

Oleg Pirogov said his daughter — the applicants were predominantly female — was very shy and interacted with foreigners over the Internet. This is the second year she'll be competing, and she wants the opportunity to improve her language skills.

Applicants gave various reasons for trying out, but most touched on language learning and cultural exposure. Yekaterina Berulava, 14, said she wanted her English to be as good as that of her brother, a program alumnus. Dasha Timerbayeva, 15, said she wanted to follow her boyfriend, a Russian-American, to the United States. Some expressed the desire to leave Russia.

"I don't like it here," said Ksyusha Kuzmina, 14.

Others said they wanted to get out of Russia, "as fast as possible."

But because the program is partly about building up an active alumni network in Russia, applicants looking to emigrate aren't likely to get a ticket. In fact, alumni aren't even allowed in the United States for two years after they return, though some will later study at U.S. colleges and universities on U.S. government programs.

That was a distant thought for the teens hopping down the schoolhouse steps into the cold. For them, the most important thing was passing this first hurdle, getting one step closer to following a dream most of them could scarcely articulate.

From behind his desk, Volodya, the school's graying security guard, watched them leave. "I

would have gone to America when I was young," he said. "Hell, I'd go now."

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