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INDEPENDENT NEWS FROM RUSSIA

Crimea Annexation Spurs Some Russians to Emigrate

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Police detaining a protester in Moscow last month at a rally against Russian military conflict in Ukraine.

National polls appear to show widespread support among Russians for the government's seizure and annexation of the Crimean peninsula last month. But not everyone in the country views the move as positive — and some see it as the last straw.

The takeover of Crimea, paired with the Kremlin's renewed crackdown on independent media outlets and opposition politicians, has prompted some people in Russia to make plans to leave the country in pursuit of a better life abroad.

"I feel fear," said Valentin Dombrovsky, 28, a businessman who plans to move to Germany. "I honestly express my thoughts and write what I think on Facebook, and no one has come after me, but I think the current situation in Russia is close to the state of a terrorist attack, when you do not know when it could happen and who could be targeted."

The emigration of members of the intellectual elite has been a persistent problem for post-Soviet Russia, and several high-profile liberal figures have left the country in recent years, including opposition leader and former chess champion Garry Kasparov and economist Sergei Guriyev.

Russia also continues to rank among the top countries from which people flee seeking political asylum. Last month, the United Nations issued a report saying that Russia was the second leading country after Syria from which citizens ask for safe haven. According to the report, about 40,000 Russians asked for asylum in countries around the world in 2013, a 76 percent increase from the year before. Germany and Poland were the most popular destinations for Russian asylum seekers.

It is difficult to determine just how many Russians have decided to emigrate due to Russia's annexation of Crimea and the current domestic political situation. But one specialist who helps people to prepare documents for moving abroad said that the number of requests from Russians had increased by about 20 percent in recent months.

"Most people are interested in emigrating to European Union countries, some ask about the U.S. as well," said Georgy Isakov, head of the Alef emigration agency. "The best choice is business emigration or emigration to countries that provide a residence permit if a person acquires property there."

Dombrovsky, a Moscow resident who co-runs the travel website Travelatus, said his desire to leave Russia had both political and economic reasons behind it.

He said the takeover of Crimea was not shocking to him after the Russian government's moves to tighten control over opposition activists and weaken the freedom of speech in recent years. But he said that by taking such actions as seizing Crimea, the Kremlin was intimidating businesspeople who have partners or business interests in Europe.

Last year, Dombrovsky's company got an offer from the German company Excursiopedia to join it. One of the conditions was that Dombrovsky would have to move to Munich. "And I was completely fine with that," he said.

Anton, 38, a businessman who plans to leave Moscow for a city in Western Europe, said the economic sanctions by the EU and the U.S. might affect his company directly since he works with European partners. Anton refused to give his surname, saying he feared legal problems when moving abroad.

"There are risks for my company and of course by moving away from Russia I protect myself from them," said Anton, who owns several Internet ventures.

Anton said that in recent years the government had begun toughening tax and administrative regulations for companies, making doing business in Russia more expensive.

"Whatever the political situation is, the economy will be in crisis," he said, arguing that the annexation of Crimea was needed by the Kremlin to camouflage Russia's current economic problems.

Close to Home

St. Petersburg resident Kseniya Kleinos, 32, has a more personal connection to the turmoil in Ukraine, having grown up in the eastern Ukrainian city of Berdyansk. Kleinos has been living in Russia for the last 13 years, and although she has a residence permit and was going to apply for Russian citizenship in April, she changed her mind due to the Kremlin's actions in her native country.

"What stopped me was the annexation of Crimea. I do not want to be a Russian citizen anymore," Kleinos said.

She said she realized when the Maidan protests began in November that she would like to go back to eastern Ukraine. "I am really proud of those people — they inspired me," she said.

Kleinos said that she would miss her Russian friends and St. Petersburg's white nights but that the most important thing for her was for politicians to pay attention to what ordinary people want and to listen to their point of view. "In Russia, it is impossible even to imagine such a thing," she said.

In her hometown of Berdyansk, she hopes to open an "anti-cafe," where people can come to play games and talk to each other.

All those interviewed by The Moscow Times expressed hope that some day Russia would abandon its policies that are increasingly isolating it from the West and become an equal part of the international community instead of frequently standing in opposition to other nations. But for now, they said, it was unacceptable for them to stay here.

"Lots of European politicians said that the West should use the situation to attract the best professionals from Russia. I think this opinion will win and more high-qualified professionals will be leaving Russia," said businessman Anton.

Andrei Sidelnikov, a former political activist who heads a group for Russians who live abroad called Speak Up, said he had observed an increase in the number of people leaving Russia in recent months and believed the number would grow.

"More and more people are selling their property in Russia or renting it out and going to countries like Indonesia, Thailand, or India, because it is very easy to move there, while a European business visa is hard to get," said Sidelnikov, who received political asylum in Britain after leaving Russia in 2007.

"In Britain, the number of refugees from Russia is constantly growing. And more people are coming here not only because they were persecuted in Russia, but because they do not see any future in Russia."

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