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Prominent Economist to Leave Russia, Cites Politics

By Howard Amos

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Prominent liberal economist and commentator Konstantin Sonin, who was reportedly squeezed out of a top job at a Russian public university earlier this year, said Wednesday that he will leave the country to take up a teaching post in the United States because of recent political developments.

Sonin, a specialist in political economy and professor at Moscow's respected Higher School of Economics, is openly critical of Kremlin economic policy and analytical pieces written by him are published regularly by Russian media, including in The Moscow Times.

"Of course the move is linked with the political events of recent years. Up until 2014 I did not even think about looking for permanent work abroad," Sonin wrote in a blog post Wednesday.

A series of top economists critical of the authorities, including the former head of Russia's New Economic School Sergei Guriev, have left Russia in recent years citing political pressure and greater professional opportunities abroad. Sonin worked closely with Guriev at the New Economic School (NES).

Growing nationalist rhetoric amid Russia's annexation of the Crimean Peninsula last year and a diplomatic standoff with the West have raised fears of pressure on prominent academics and experts critical of official policy.

Sonin will take up a position as a professor at the prestigious University of Chicago from September where he will work alongside internationally renowned economists, he wrote on his blog.

"Russia's loss, Chicago's gain," former U.S. Ambassador to Russia Michael McFaul tweeted Wednesday.

Once tipped to be appointed to head Moscow's NES, a private graduate-level economics university, Sonin appears to have been sidelined in recent months as he publicly castigated the Kremlin over Russia's economic crisis and the collapse of the ruble amid Western sanctions over Ukraine.

In a typically trenchant comment piece published Feb. 12 by Russia's Vedomosti newspaper, Sonin called for Russia to slash military expenditure, fire corrupt government officials and cancel a food import ban. "Conversations about 'structural reforms' without a renewal of the political leadership are meaningless babble," he wrote.

Sonin stepped down from his position as vice rector at the Higher School of Economics in December, retaining just a professorship. Friends characterized the move as the university administration forcing him out for a position because he was increasingly associated with criticism of the government.

The head of the Higher School of Economics, Yaroslav Kuzminov, is the husband of Central Bank Chairwoman Elvira Nabiullina and was this month elected co-chair of the Moscow branch of the People's Front, an organization set up in 2011 and headed by President Vladimir Putin.

There was nothing unusual about Sonin's departure, Putin's spokesman Dmitry Peskov said Wednesday. "The Kremlin regrets it when famous economists go and work abroad and the Kremlin welcomes it when famous economists come and work in Russia," Peskov was cited as saying by the Interfax news agency.

Sonin left NES for the Higher School of Economics in 2013 shortly after his colleague Guriev fled Russia fearing arrest amid an investigation by law enforcement authorities over expert testimony given to a commission examining the 2010 trial of former oil tycoon Mikhail Khodorkovsky.

Guriev is currently based in Paris where he works as a professor of economics at France's influential Sciences Po university.

Another colleague of Sonin's, Sergei Aleksashenko, a former deputy Finance Minister and a

professor at the Higher School of Economics who has links with Russia's opposition movement, took up a yearlong position at Georgetown University in Washington, D.C. in 2013.

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