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Gaidar's Departure Is a Sad Sign of the Times

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Maria Gaidar

Maria Gaidar's decision to go to Ukraine to serve as vice governor of the Odessa region under former Georgian President Mikheil Saakashvili and to take on Ukrainian citizenship in addition to her Russian citizenship has sparked a storm of emotions in Russia. The event became a sort of milestone reflecting a number of current attitudes and trends.

Maria Gaider is the daughter of Yegor Gaidar, the prominent liberal who served as prime minister in the early 1990s and who is popularly known as the father of Russia's radical market reforms. It is an extraordinary event for a former prime minister's daughter — herself a well-known opposition politician and public figure — to decide to leave the country.

However, it is very much in line with the old Soviet tradition by which the children and close relatives of senior officials left the country after those leaders were no longer in power. Svetlana Alliluyeva, the daughter of former Soviet leader Josef Stalin, left the country in 1967,

and the dictator's granddaughter also became a U.S. citizen.

Sergei Khrushchev, the son of former Soviet leader Nikita Khrushchev, has held both U.S. and Russian citizenship since 1999 and resides permanently in the United States. Grandchildren of the omnipotent former KGB chief and Soviet leader Yury Andropov also live in the United States.

The daughter of Mikhail Suslov, the main ideologue under former Soviet leaders Josef Stalin and Leonid Brezhnev, resides in Austria. And finally, young descendents of Brezhnev either live or study in the U.S. and Britain.

Traditionally, the Russian system only protects those who are currently in office. After they fall from power, citizens view their relatives as whipping boys for the accumulated grievances against their famous namesakes, while the new leadership uses them as convenient scapegoats for the country's problems.

Maria Gaidar is a vivid illustration of this phenomenon: she is hated by both the ruling elite and the common people. Her father, Yegor Gaidar, consistently ranks as one of the most unpopular and even hated leaders in modern Russian history.

Most Russians associate his name with economic decline, hyperinflation, government defaults on pensions and salaries, the explosive growth of unemployment, unfair privatization and so on. Whether or not his actions triggered the economic downturn or he actually saved the economy from complete collapse, it is common practice to place the blame for those problems on Yegor Gaidar — and part of that hatred is transferred to his daughter.

Maria Gaidar repeatedly faced manifestations of that hatred, and sometimes as direct threats. After her recent move to Odessa, official Russian propaganda accused her for all the "sins of her father" and labeled her decision a treacherous liberal continuation of the "treacherous liberal activities of her father."

The main tactic of Kremlin ideology over the past 15 years has been to blame its own failures in the 2000s — de-industrialization, an increased dependence on raw materials exports, the rise in corruption and deepening social stratification — on the reformers of the 1990s, and personally on Yegor Gaidar.

The daily reminders of the horrors of the "wild '90s" is an important part of the Kremlin's tactic for evading responsibility, along with its method of "playing on contrasts" by effectively saying: "Look at how terrible everything was then, and how great it is now." In this way the authorities fan the hatred from above.

I know Maria Gaidar well and her efforts over many years to carve out a place for herself in Russia. As a successful deputy governor of the Kirov region under the liberal Governor Nikita Belykh, she successfully made the health care system and social services more efficient. She later applied the broad experience she gained in Kirov to her job as adviser on social policy and health to the vice mayor of Moscow.

She was very much hoping to run for office in the Moscow City Duma elections and had prepared a large packet of social reforms that she hoped to offer Muscovites in the event

of gaining office. However, she was denied the opportunity to even register as a candidate for those elections, as were all opposition candidates that the authorities deemed undesirable.

Each of her tenacious attempts to realize her progressive ideas in Russia repeatedly ran up against the brick wall of official rejection and resistance.

With independently minded people finding it impossible to realize their political, social and even professional goals in Russia, an increasing number of outstanding individuals have decided to leave the country. Another major reason behind the exodus is that the siloviki level obviously trumped up criminal charges against anyone they choose to pressure.

The departure of prominent journalists is especially remarkable. Only recently, those wanting or forced to seek employment abroad included Aider Muzhdabayev, Pavel Sheremet, Ksenia Turkova, Galina Timchenko — along with the whole team of the Medusa news site, Tikhon Dzyadko, Timur Olevsky, Roman Super, Rustem Adagamov — who fled to Prague to escape criminal charges at home — and many others.

Such outstanding and outspoken economists as Sergei Aleksashenko, Sergei Guriyev and Konstantin Sonin are also leaving the country. During the St. Petersburg Economic Forum, Deputy Prime Minister Olga Golodets said that 200,000 people had left Russia since the start of 2015 and rightly concluded that it represented one of the most serious obstacles to Russia's development.

If trumped-up criminal charges against opposition politicians, social activists and bloggers become more frequent, if more independent journalists and economists lose their jobs and if the opposition is not allowed to take part in elections this year or next, that exodus could become much greater in scope.

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