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INDEPENDENT NEWS FROM RUSSIA

'I Love My Country and Hate the State'

Young Russians struggle with the decision to stay or go.

By Yanina Sorokina

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Sergei Vedyashkin / Moskva News Agency

“I barely slept for an hour and a half. I was sick to my stomach and can’t eat,” Maria, age 24, told The Moscow Times four days after Russia began its “special military operation” against Ukraine.

“I want to be civic-minded, but I'm a mess. I just want to fly away. When I’m away from Russia I can start writing to MPs and help change the rhetoric on Internet.”

Trembling voices, anxiety and a decision to leave Russia to be safe — these are shared by many young Russians. The Moscow Times spoke to 32 people in their twenties and early thirties. More than half of them have either decided to leave the country or have already left.

Despite sanctions and drop in the value of the currency, the economy is not the main reason why people are leaving.

“I’m less afraid to attend demonstrations here than in Russia,” said several people now living in Georgia, Armenia, and different countries of the European Union.

Safety is the number one reason to leave Russia for 64% of respondents in a survey by a project of the Russia-based non-governmental organization Takie Dela. For many Russians, the war has just worsened their general feeling of anxiety living in an increasingly repressive state.

“I was in Georgia last summer and went to pride month rallies. I felt safer there than I did at a rally in Russia,” Tina G., age 25, told The Moscow Times. She is a researcher for a private company with dual Georgian-Russian citizenship.

“Since February 24 I have basically been just smoking a pack of cigarettes a day. I sleep and don’t do much else,” she said.

Tina has already experienced the arrival of Russian troops. In August 2008 Russia invaded Georgia and recognized South Ossetia and Abkhazia, separatist Georgian regions, as independent states.

“I definitely have flashbacks to 2008,” she said. “I was in Georgia then, and it was very frightening.” But despite these memories, she feels safer in Tbilisi than in Moscow. “I do not like the current Georgian government either, but if I had to renounce one of my citizenships, I’d give up the Russian one,” she said.

Five other people interviewed have denounced their homeland and are mentally prepared to renounce their citizenship if need be.

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“I decided to leave because on Feb. 24 I woke up without a homeland,” V, a manager in her late 20s, told The Moscow Times.

“All the beautiful things my country gave me — education, culture — were wiped out in a second. It felt like my heart broke a thousand times.”

Leonid Z., 30, Python developer, moved abroad on a special program in the fall of 2021. He had plans to visit relatives in Russia, but now returning is out of the question.

“I was in despair the first two days [after the war started]. Now I have understood that in a sense my homeland has disappeared. I can not associate myself in any way with what this country has done...That's it, I'm an immigrant now.”

Another seven people expressed similar feelings towards their government but decided to stay.

“I really love the Russian people. I’m Russian myself, so I’m staying here,” Mark Pekarev, 24, a teacher at a leading Russian university told The Moscow Times.

"I understand that it’s bad now and will get even worse. But we have to live through it. I think

I would drink myself to death or hang myself if I went abroad."

"For me, staying in Russia is a certain duty., Vasya, 22, who works in a Moscow art center, said. "I've always had the feeling that you have to go all the way. The worst that could happen is a death by torture. I think I can handle it."

Four days after the interviews, Maria and V decided to stay. Maria feels hopeful about upcoming rallies. V is thinking of staying so she can tell her children she tried. Some people did not want to use their names for security reasons.

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