The Moscow Times
30 YEARS
INDEPENDENT NEWS FROM RUSSIA

Fleeing Putin, Russians Resettle in Pro-Kremlin Serbia

By Miodrag Sovilj for AFP

March 25, 2022



An Airbus A319 passenger plane of the Air Serbia airline at Platov Airport. **Erik Romanenko/TASS**

As free speech was curtailed, her friends imprisoned and the Russian economy tanked in the days after Vladimir Putin ordered the invasion of Ukraine, Marina packed her bags and fled Moscow.

But more than a thousand miles away in her new home in Serbia, the 41-year-old former travel agent has found herself unable to escape the long arm of Russian propaganda in Belgrade where the Kremlin's war enjoys broad support.

"Some locals tell me they support Russia when they learn I am from Russia. They say it to express their support, but it turns out this support extends to supporting Putin and his actions and the war," Marina told AFP, who asked to withhold her surname.

In the weeks following the invasion, Serbia has become a haven for many Russians hoping to

escape abroad, with the country providing one of the few regular flight routes into Europe following mass bans across the continent.

For centuries, Serbia and Russia have been united by deep fraternal links thanks to their Slavic and Orthodox heritage. And while Serbians have welcomed Russians with open arms, it is not without contradictions.

The Russians by and large resettling in Serbia have sought to flee from the catastrophic fallout at home sparked by Putin's invasion of Ukraine.

Serbia, however, has remained an outlier in Europe where large swaths of its population continue to back Putin's self-described war against the West in Ukraine.

Much of the support for Putin is rooted in the collective hatred of NATO, with memories of the alliance's bombing of the country in the 1990s still fresh in the minds of many in Serbia.

Related article: Fleeing Russians Report Lengthy Interrogations at Airports

Rage and despair

In Belgrade, hundreds of demonstrators hailing Putin and condemning NATO have taken to the streets, as the government has wafted between condemning the war at the United Nations while refusing to sanction Moscow at home.

The catch-22 has led to occasional confrontation, according to Marina, who said conversations with Serbia supporters of Putin oftens sparks feelings ranging from rage, despair, and shame.

"It turns out that this person is bombarded with Russian propaganda and actually believes that pictures of destroyed cities and dead people in Ukraine are fakes," says Marina.

"And this mindset is so strong I don't believe I can do something so I give up and quit the conversation."

There is no official tally of the number of Russians who have decamped to Serbia — they can stay visa free for 30 days — but a Telegram group for new arrivals already numbers in the hundreds.

Among the conversation topics on the group includes advice on how to handle the unwanted affection from Serbians backing Putin.

IT specialist Iakov Borevich said he chose Belgrade due to the "closeness of culture" with Russia and the "mentality" but has grappled with some of the pro-Kremlin sentiments on the street, including a mural of Putin near his new apartment that says "Brother" in Cyrillic.

But Borevich said he also remains somewhat sympathetic to the outpouring of emotion in Serbia that has also entangled many of his fellow Russians who often conflate patriotism with supporting Putin.

"Perhaps, for the population of the country, for Serbia, the face of the country is the leader, and this manifests as positive feelings towards Russia," says Borevich.

Related article: [‘My Father Said I’m a Traitor Who Should Be Shot First’: War in Ukraine Splits Russian Families]

'Not a patriot'

For many, leaving Russia was a difficult decision — one that was made in a matter of hours while packing a few belongings and leaving behind friends and loved ones.

"My dad told me I was not a patriot anymore... and that I have to stay and contribute to the economy," says Kirill, a 31-year-old civil engineer, who recently relocated to Belgrade.

"But I completely understood that if I stayed, all the taxes I'd pay would be a straight contribution to the war."

Even still, he remains unsure if he will stay in Serbia or return home to St. Petersburg.

Others fear they will never go back amid Putin's ongoing crackdown on dissent as a new iron curtain closes off Russia from much of the world.

"As soon as I came here, I felt a great weight lifted off my shoulders," said Marina.

"Now I am horrified to see what is happening in Russia."

Original url:
https://www.themoscowtimes.com/2022/03/25/fleeing-putin-russians-resettle-in-pro-kremlin-serbia-a77078