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Russia Plays Tug-of-War as Its Talented IT Workers Head for the Door

A government plan to entice IT workers to stay in Russia despite sanctions and political crackdowns gets a lukewarm response.

By Yanina Sorokina

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Djordje Petrovic / pexels

YEREVAN – In a sprawling apartment in the heart of Armenia's capital, four young Russian IT specialists gather around Apple laptops, going about their work day far from home.

This group of software engineers, who work for Russian web giants Ozon and Yandex, are just some of the 70,000-100,000 Russians who have left the country since the Kremlin launched its invasion of Ukraine, accelerating the so-called "brain drain" of Russia's most specialized workforce.

"When the war broke out, I had a fear of being mobilized and bought tickets to Yerevan. I had

felt uncomfortable living in Russia for a long time," Sasha, a 23-year-old machine learning engineer at Yandex, told The Moscow Times.

The mass exodus has hit Russia's tech sector particularly hard – with roughly 13% of IT workers leaving the country in the past month – and dealt a new blow to Russia's efforts to build a globally competitive tech sector.

With as many as 70,000 more IT workers expected to potentially leave by the end of April, officials quickly drafted measures aimed at enticing them to stay.

A resolution signed by Prime Minister Mikhail Mishustin on Tuesday would exempt IT specialists from the military draft.

Specialists younger than 27 "who have higher education and have worked in IT companies for at least one year" will qualify for the exemption, which also provides for reduced taxes and promises of higher wages.

But the pledges have brought little hope for many tech specialists who are still reeling at the dire outlook for their industry following the invasion and resulting Western sanctions.

"I was disgusted when I found out about these measures," said Lepra, a 25-year-old senior developer at one of Russia's largest IT companies.

Plans to develop Russia's IT sphere – first set out in 2009 under then-President Dmitry Medvedev in an effort to diversify the Russian economy away from its reliance on oil and gas – have slowly picked up speed in recent years, with the tech sector becoming the fastest-growing sector in the Russian economy.

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These leaps, though, have come with a dependence on U.S.-made systems and technologies, as well as an inability to mitigate the steady outflow of workers seeking higher wages in Europe and the U.S.

The average Russian IT specialist earns around $1,650 a month. While that's about three times more than the average monthly salary in Russia, according to state statistics service Rosstat, the figure is dwarfed by wages for similar jobs in the U.S.

"If I work for a Western company, my salary could be twice as high," said a senior data scientist at one of Russia's biggest online marketplaces.

Meanwhile, an increasingly restrictive climate for free speech at home has made some tech specialists worry that they won't be able to do their jobs independent of the state.

"I want to do interesting technical things, to express myself freely, and not be afraid of the return of the Soviet Union," Lepra said.

Experts say far-reaching Western sanctions disrupting the supply of U.S.-made microchips,

semiconductors and other high-tech components – as well as expanding state censorship – will likely stunt any further expansion of Russia's tech sector.

But rather than offer an incentive to stay, the law introduced Tuesday revealed just how little lawmakers understand about tech sector employees' needs, a team leader at one of Russia's biggest IT companies told The Moscow Times.

The requirements set out by the government's resolution do little to aid the many tech workers who do not have higher education, said the worker, who asked to keep his employer's name confidential.

"First of all, 20% of Yandex employees don't have a college degree... Secondly, I know about 500 IT people and not one of them has been in the army," he said.

It would be more reassuring if the government set out conditions where IT specialists didn't feel forced to stay during a crisis but were properly supported all along, one Sberbank middle software engineer who stayed in Russia told The Moscow Times.

"I generally support the measure, but the timing doesn't sit well with me," he said.

Yet if the war drags on, and the political and economic situations does not improve, even the Sberbank engineer said he may consider leaving.

"The problem is that if there was no 'special military operation,' there would be no support [for us]," he said.

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