

Kyrgyzstan Sees Struggles, Opportunity in Russian Emigration Wave

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Bishkek, Kyrgyzstan. **Alexander Miridonov / Kommersant**

BISHKEK, Kyrgyzstan — Russian entrepreneurs Yulia and Ilya Kuleshov worked hard to transform the large house they rented in the Kyrgyz capital into a center for creative volunteer projects after they relocated from St. Petersburg in the early days of Russia’s invasion of Ukraine.

But, when President Vladimir Putin announced a “partial” mobilization in late September, the Kuleshov’s two-story house, where they also live, became a temporary refuge for fellow Russians.

“We were showered with requests for people to crash somewhere for at least a night or two,” Kuleshova told The Moscow Times from the eight-bedroom home she and her husband have dubbed “Red Roof.”

The chaotic exodus of hundreds of thousands of mobilization-age Russians sparked by the Kremlin's month-long draft has dramatically reshaped former Soviet nations like Kyrgyzstan, driving up real estate prices and giving a major boost to local economies.

Cities like Bishkek, where Russian is still widely spoken, became popular destinations for fleeing Russians, who had few options for leaving the country due to Western flight bans, border closures and the skyrocketing cost of flights to the few available destinations.

Drawing on a decade's worth of [experience](#) running charity startups, the Kuleshovs quickly organized a team of volunteers in late September and rented a separate house to provide short-term living space for new arrivals.

At one point, Kuleshova said Red Roof was housing up to 20 Russians who had left the country to evade mobilization.

"People were sleeping three to a room and on couches in the hallways," Kuleshova said. "Residents of Bishkek answered our call to donate mattresses and sheets so we could set up sleeping spots on the floor."

Almost half a million Russians arrived in Kyrgyzstan in the first nine months of this year, according to [official](#) Kyrgyz figures, which is more than double the number recorded over the same period last year. While many have since left, tens of thousands are believed to have settled in the country for the medium- or long-term.

Alexandra Litvinova, an activist who fled Russia's high-tech town of Innopolis when the war started, had been planning to move in with the Kuleshovs. Instead, she found herself sourcing beds for Russians who had just arrived in Bishkek.

"Myself and almost everyone I know from the first wave had couchsurfers living with them," she told The Moscow Times at an orientation event for new Russian arrivals at a Bishkek bar.

Litvinova also volunteered to help run a chat group on Telegram messaging app providing information for Russians arriving in Kyrgyzstan.

She said the chat's administrators were "in absolute shock" as the number of subscribers grew more than fivefold after the mobilization announcement and they started receiving enquiries from Kyrgyz journalists.

While the Kyrgyz reaction to the arrival of so many Russians has been predominantly positive, some tensions have been sparked by the wealth of many new arrivals (per-capita purchasing power in Russia is six times that in Kyrgyzstan, [according](#) to the World Bank).

In particular, Kyrgyz landlords have [hiked](#) rents — some by as much as 100% — and there have been cases of local tenants being [evicted](#) in favor of Russians.

Litvinova said she often sees anger over the overheated housing market among the 23,500 Russian members of the Telegram chat she helps manage.

“Everyone’s scared,” Litvinova said. “But it’s a chat that offers help and does not inflame wars. So we had to ban 2,000 accounts.”

Some Russians have encountered rental scams and attempts by airport police to extort money, according to Litvinova, but she noted these incidents were rare.

“Negativity is more immediate and visible, although positive experiences here far outweigh negative ones,” she said.

Price rises in Bishkek have also forced newly arriving Russians to disperse to more remote locations across this landlocked and mountainous country of 7 million.

A Russian woman who requested anonymity to speak freely told The Moscow Times that her family’s limited savings meant they decided to move to Jalal-Abad, a town of 120,000 in southern Kyrgyzstan’s fertile and multi-ethnic Fergana Valley.

“We left in a rush and panic, so we picked an itinerary that best fitted our financial circumstances,” she said.

“It was a random choice, but we’re grateful to fate, the country and its residents.”

While those who fled Russia at the start of the war were mostly IT workers or other specialists with large disposable incomes, the Russians fleeing Putin’s mobilization drive have been much more economically and socially diverse, [according](#) to migration researcher Yan Matusevich.

Post-mobilization emigres include “kids from smaller cities with zero money” and ethnic minorities from Siberia and the Far East with “absolutely no resources,” Matusevich said in a Twitter thread published at the end of September. “They’re mostly completely shell-shocked and disoriented, having left with just a duffle bag.”

This lack of preparation, coupled with Putin’s announcement last month that Russia’s “partial” mobilization was at an end, means some Russians who fled in September have already [returned](#) home, easing pressure on rents in cities like Bishkek.

But many more intend to remain abroad, fearing mobilization could be restarted.

Litvinova even predicted that Kyrgyzstan would soon be facing a “third wave” of Russian emigres. “These will be women and children who will join their husbands after wrapping up their affairs in Russia,” she said.

With the growing pains from the arrival of so many Russians has also come economic opportunities.

Kyrgyzstan’s economy [grew](#) 8% in the first eight months of this year, up from just 3.6% in the whole of 2021. Other popular destinations for fleeing Russians have also seen economic booms, with the South Caucasus nations of Georgia and Armenia now [expecting](#), respectively, 10% and 13% economic growth this year.

Economists [predict](#) the arrival of specialists and potential investors from Russia, as well as multinational corporations like [Apple](#) relocating their staff to Bishkek, will provide a tangible boost to the Kyrgyz economy.

“I really hope at least part of the money they [Russians] bring over and pay here will make its way into the country’s budget,” said Litvinova.

“I really want this wave to benefit Kyrgyzstan.”

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