

Russia Seeks to Lure Back Wartime Emigres – But Offers Few Incentives

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People with suitcases on the road to the Russia-Georgia border crossing at Verkhny Lars. **Emin Jafarov / Kommersant**

Russian officials are working to lure back the hundreds of thousands of citizens who moved abroad since the launch of the country's military offensive against Ukraine — but have so far given them little, if any, incentive to go back.

Between [700,000 and 1.5 million](#) Russians are estimated to have left the country following the February 2022 offensive, either out of opposition to the war or fear of being sent to the frontlines.

For the Kremlin, this mass exodus of predominantly young, educated workers — widely called *relokanti* (which translates to “those who’ve relocated”) — is a matter of urgency, as it exacerbates the country’s economic and demographic woes, the latter of which Moscow considers a national security issue.

President Vladimir Putin in June [claimed](#) that half of the Russians who left the country after the start of the conflict have since returned, and more of them are still returning.

His speech at the St. Petersburg International Economic Forum prompted officials, such as State Duma Speaker Vyacheslav Volodin, to renew calls for emigres to come home.

“Our citizens who remain in Western countries need to think about where they went, what they found, and what awaits them,” Volodin [wrote](#) on his Telegram channel. “Considering what is happening, it is right to finally start being rational. Today there is an opportunity to return, but tomorrow, due to the hysteria being whipped up in Western Europe, [this opportunity] might be gone.”

Pro-Kremlin journalist Alexander Kots [published](#) a letter in the Komsomolskaya Pravda tabloid which he purported was written by an IT specialist who left Russia for Europe after February 2022, but soon faced Russophobia and a lack of social support. Until recently, the IT specialist described himself as a “liberal,” but meeting a Serbian man who compared present-day Russia to Yugoslavia in the 1990s changed his mind.

“I returned to Russia, and I am very happy about it,” the letter’s author — who many speculated was Kots himself — wrote. “I’m not leaving my homeland again. I will raise my son (or more than one son, if God wills it) here and will pass all this on to him. And I won’t let my homeland down now, believe me.”

Despite officials’ calls and propaganda efforts, no substantial incentives to lure back Russian emigres have emerged.

While a “reverse relocation” program for IT specialists was discussed in 2022, it was ultimately not needed, digital development minister Maksut Shadayev [claimed](#), as those who left Russia were returning on their own. He said that deferment from military service for IT workers and the fact that “life in Russia is in many ways better” than abroad had lured many back.

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Meanwhile, calls to draw up punishments for wartime emigres by more hardline officials have persisted. On June 21, Senator Andrei Klimov, the head of the Federation Council’s commission on protecting state sovereignty and preventing interference in domestic affairs, [suggested](#) that Russians returning to the country from abroad could be inspected for treason.

“Our opponents did not miss the opportunity to expand the ranks of their henchmen and agents through recruitment activities among the so-called *relokanti*,” he said.

According to journalist and politician Yevgeniya Baltatarova, the dissonance between officials’ calls to incentivize and punish emigres is due to the fact that politicians are more focused on pleasing Putin than building a clear strategy for attracting emigres.

“[Putin] was offended that Russians did not support the mobilization, and they tried to play along with him,” she said. “But also there is also a more liberal bloc in the government, and

they understand that the loss of a huge number of educated, ambitious people entails economic losses. That's why the rhetoric of the authorities varies from the imprisonment of emigres to the calls for them to return."

Nevertheless, some Russian emigres do return to the country. Sociologist Lyubov Borusyak, who has been researching Russian emigration since the invasion of Ukraine, said many of those coming back are emigres from the second wave, which was sparked by Putin's mobilization for the war in Ukraine.

"The main reason they return is the lack of employment and money. Mostly, they departed spontaneously and in a panic," she said. "People without a financial cushion had to return."

Ivan, who asked that his name be changed, fled to Kazakhstan in September 2022 after Russia declared its military mobilization. Because he had to quit his office job in Russia, Ivan lived off his savings and money earned from renting out his flat in Moscow until he could find a job in Almaty.

"The real estate market was overheated, and it turned out that I was working for 35,000 rubles [per month], and renting an apartment for 40,000," he said. "After three months, I decided to return to Moscow. There was not enough money, I was tired mentally and physically, and I felt lonely. I just wanted to return and rebuild my financial independence."

Baltatarova noted that Russian state media does little to encourage emigres to come back.

"People have been returning, not because they believed someone [in the government], but because they see that the situation is much less chaotic compared to September, and by adhering to security measures, they can somehow avoid mobilization and other threats."

Those who decide to come back tend not to believe officials' promises and carefully prepare for their return.

Anatoly, who asked that his name be changed, left Russia in March 2022 and has been traveling in Southeast Asia while working remotely. He said he now plans to go back to Russia to finish the paperwork for his final relocation, but is concerned about legal issues.

"Most likely, I will go back for just two weeks," he said. "I am planning to withdraw from military registration [the database of men eligible for conscription] using a power of attorney, and by law I cannot stay in Russia longer without [this] registration."

Brief sojourns like Anatoly's make it difficult to accurately measure how many Russian emigres are returning home for good.

"We don't know the scale of this return process, and we will never know," said Borusyak. "The estimates of those who left are rather rough, and the estimates of those who returned are even rougher."

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