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An Ark for Russian Emigres: The Project Helping Anti-War Russians Find Their Footing Abroad

Kovcheg has helped at least 150,000 Russians who fled because of the war adjust to life in exile. Its work is far from over.

By Moscow Times Reporter

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People walk by a queue of vehicles on the road for the Verkhny Lars checkpoint on the Russian-Georgian border in September 2022. **Yelena Afonina / TASS**

Natalia Kondal, a Russian citizen with Ukrainian roots from the Ural Mountain city of Yekaterinburg, was forced to leave Russia shortly after the start of the war against Kyiv amid intensified repression from the Kremlin.

As she looked to get back on her feet in Europe, she turned to Kovcheg, an organization that helps Russian citizens rebuild their lives abroad and supports anti-war activists still inside the country.

At least 650,000 people like Kondal have permanently fled Russia since the invasion — whether in protest of the war, to escape repression for their dissenting views or to avoid army conscription.

Many left without a clear plan, often with little money or prospects, ending up in unfamiliar countries and separated from their loved ones.

Kovcheg — Russian for "ark" — helped Kondal to find accommodation, where she lived for about six months, assisted with her paperwork and offered support with integrating into her new surroundings.

"We started Kovcheg as a volunteer project with no staff — just me, an idea and some donations," Kovcheg's founder Anastasia Burakova told The Moscow Times while sitting in a cafe in Tbilisi, Georgia, where Burakova emigrated following the invasion.

"It was a spontaneous response to the war and the fact that people were leaving Russia. Many Russians had little international experience, some had never been abroad. But these were like-minded people, so our main goal was to help them," Burakova said.

Since then, Kovcheg has grown into a large organization that, in addition to providing housing and document assistance, helps with language learning, hosts public talks and film screenings and offers guidance for business projects.

Most Russian emigres left either shortly after the war began in 2022 or later that year following the Kremlin's "partial" mobilization, which aimed to increase the number of soldiers at the front. They found refuge in Armenia, Georgia, Turkey, Kazakhstan and other countries across Europe.

Many emigres grappled with a sense of isolation, struggling to rebuild their communities abroad and facing fears of being branded as "traitors" by people still in Russia. Kovcheg works to bridge the gap, aiming to maintain connections between those in Russia and those who have left the country.

"The Kremlin is trying to lower the Iron Curtain and we're doing our best to prevent that," Burakova said. "[But] we're working to develop ideas, actions and clear projects within our community and then find ways to spread them, showcasing an alternative vision for Russia's future."

Since 2022, Kovcheg has provided psychological assistance to over 11,000 people coping with the emotional challenges of displacement. Additionally, around 1,900 individuals have taken Kovcheg's language courses to learn how to speak the language of their new communities.

Another important aspect of the group's work is representing anti-war Russians on the international stage, explaining the need to assist them, fostering civil society and addressing the anti-war movement, as well as discussing visa and residency issues for Russians abroad, Burakova said.

Over the past two and a half years, Kovcheg's work has evolved significantly to address emigres' changing needs the longer they stay abroad. There has been a growing demand for communication between emigres, help with cultural adaptation, legal consultation and

professional career coaching.

But one of the most vital forms of support for anti-war Russians who left the country has been, and continues to be, providing emergency housing — like for Tatiana, who fled Russia for Turkey.

Alone in a foreign country with no contacts and little money, Tatiana told The Moscow Times she felt completely overwhelmed: "I was lost and didn't know what to do. I had no idea how long I'd be away, and I wasn't prepared for any of it."

About 10 days after arriving, Tatiana applied for assistance through Kovcheg's website and the project found her a spot in a shared apartment.

"It had six rooms and 12 beds, with people constantly coming and going — some moved on to other countries, while new arrivals took their place, but having a roof over my head was a huge relief," said Tatiana, who asked her name be changed for security reasons.

Kovcheg founder Burakova said she understands the challenges of relocation firsthand.

Before landing in Tbilisi, she worked as a lawyer in Moscow, running an organization that provided legal assistance to people facing political persecution. Fearing prosecution, she fled to Kyiv after the authorities blocked the organization's website — only to relocate again a few months later when the war began.

When asked why it's important to support Russians who fled their country during the war, Burakova explained that while her organization frequently addresses the war and collaborates with projects assisting Ukrainian refugees, it is equally crucial to focus on building a healthy political society in Russia despite the challenges.

"I want Russia to become a democratic country, with people taking an active part in this process. That's why our main goal is to show people that politics is everyone's business. Everyone can find a niche that interests them," Burakova said.

It appears that Kovcheg, which has already helped at least 150,000 Russians, has significant potential to meet this goal.

"While Kovcheg encompasses many things, it is at its core about people and community," Burakova told The Moscow Times.

"Without our volunteers — those who donate, help and share their ideas with us — we probably wouldn't be able to survive."

Anastasia Burakova will speak at Women Against the Kremlin, a groundbreaking gathering of women leaders standing against war and authoritarianism hosted by The Moscow Times in Amsterdam on Nov. 26, 2024.

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