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Russian Dissidents Stranded in Spain After Residency Requests Allegedly Denied

By Mack Tubridy

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Courtesy photo

A group of 65 Russian dissidents who relocated to Spain last year say they have been left in legal limbo after Spanish authorities allegedly failed to follow through on promises of providing residency status, El Pais reported Monday.

The exiled activists, who included former regional coordinators for Alexei Navalny's Anti-Corruption Foundation, received tourist visas on humanitarian grounds to travel to Spain last summer after diplomatic outreach from Madrid. They claim Spanish officials assured them of a fast-track residency process, but those efforts stalled after key government contacts stopped responding.

The dissidents, many of whom previously sought refuge in Georgia, say they were encouraged

to move to Spain due to deteriorating safety conditions in the South Caucasus country, where authorities have increasingly targeted both domestic dissidents and exiled Kremlin critics.

Free Russia Foundation, a pro-democracy advocacy group headquartered in the U.S., coordinated with Spanish authorities to help relocate the activists from Georgia.

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Some of the activists have since had their humanitarian residence applications denied. Spanish officials ruled they did not face a proven risk if they returned to Russia despite Moscow's intensified crackdown on opposition voices and some of the individuals facing criminal charges in Russia over their anti-war views.

According to El Pais, of the 14 activists who had residency applications processed, eight have already received rejections.

"Without that promise, we would never have come to Spain," Egor Kuroptev, who leads the South Caucasus office of the Free Russia Foundation, told El Pais. "The result is that the resettled group has spent more than six months in an irregular situation in Spain."

Kuroptev told The Moscow Times later on Monday that his organization received written confirmation from the Spanish Foreign Ministry about providing fast-track residency. He said he shared those documents with El Pais and El Mundo, but declined to show them to The Moscow Times, citing ethical concerns.

"This relocation track had been discussed at all levels of the Spanish MFA since the summer of 2023, and all processes were thoroughly agreed upon, including in correspondence, specifying the exact type of residence permit and other details," he said.

"Right now, we simply want to draw the government's attention and request their help as soon as possible," he added.

Kuroptev said he believes miscommunication within the Spanish Foreign Ministry, as well as "changes in the responsible coordinators," led to the suspension of help for the group of activists.

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Sources in Spain's Foreign Ministry denied ever guaranteeing residency and insisted the dissidents can apply for asylum, according to El Pais.

The ministry did not respond to a request for comment from The Moscow Times.

A Tbilisi-based activist initially involved in the relocation scheme said the Free Russia Foundation created a list in August 2022 for those wishing to relocate to Spain with their help, but the process became delayed and eventually appeared to have stalled.

“However, at some point, they [Free Russia Foundation] reached some sort of agreement [with the Spanish Foreign Ministry] and started compiling the first list, which only included prominent figures — media-savvy activists,” the activist told The Moscow Times, asking to remain anonymous.

“They were initially given tourist visas and came to Spain, but for some reason, the Spanish authorities didn’t fulfill the agreements that Free Russia Foundation had told the activists about, and now they’re stuck with expired Schengen tourist visas,” the activist said.

Some among the group of Russian exiles in Spain argue that seeking asylum now — after being advised to pursue a different path — could leave them unable to work or travel for years while their cases are processed in an overburdened system.

“There is a mechanism for international protection that one can apply for, and this is what the MFA is currently publicly suggesting. This is true,” Kuroptev told The Moscow Times

“The problem, however, is that obtaining a residence permit through international protection in Spain takes years. That is precisely why we spent a year negotiating every stage of the process,” he added.

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