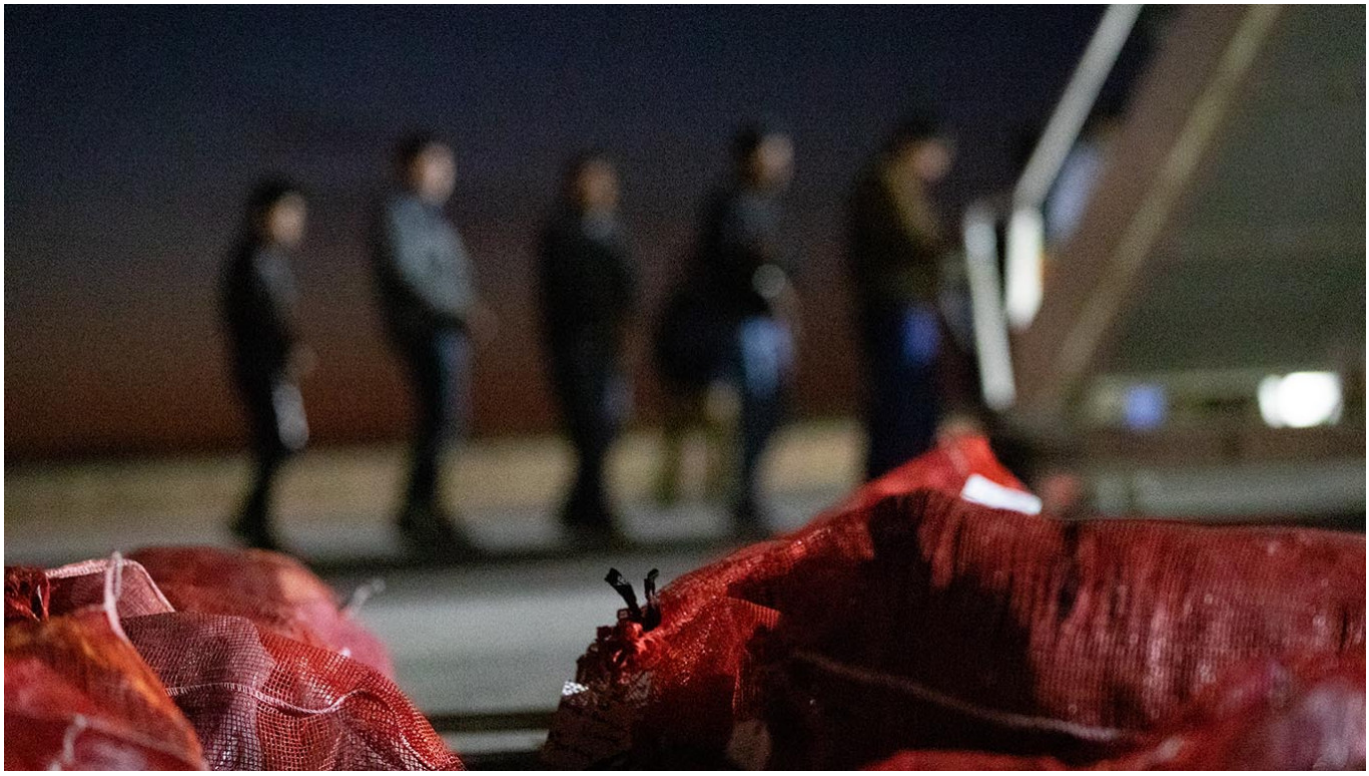
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Asylum-Seeking Russians Deported From U.S. at Risk of Persecution and Forced Mobilization, Activists Warn

By Brawley Benson

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Jerry Glaser / U.S. Customs and Border Protection

A plane carrying Russian citizens deported from the U.S. touched down in Moscow on Tuesday amid fears that some on board might face unjust imprisonment.

Dmitry Valuev, president of U.S. diaspora organization Russian America for Democracy in Russia, said some of the passengers held anti-government views that could make them a target for political persecution.

"There were people who, unfortunately, were deported because they did not receive asylum," Valuev said of the flight, which The New York Times confirmed took place. "These are people who hold opposition views — people who have pro-democratic, pro-European views, and it is a great tragedy."

Valuev, who advocates on behalf of detained Russian asylum seekers, said he did not know the exact number of Russians who were deported as part of this most recent effort.

The exiled Russian outlet Mediazona cited a relative of one passenger as saying that there were 64 passengers on the plane.

Men on the flight were handed military summons immediately upon landing, Valuev told the exiled Russian outlet Agenstvo.

Related article: They Fled Discrimination in Russia. Now They're Swept Up in Trump's Immigration Crackdown.

The plane left from Arizona around noon on Dec. 7 and stopped over in Egypt, where, according to The New York Times, Russian passengers were separated from the rest of the group, which also included deported Iranians.

A flight tracking website showed a plane matching the details of the reported deportation flight touching down at Moscow's Domodedovo Airport at 2:39 a.m. local time.

The Dec. 9 flight was the third such charter plane carrying Russians deported from the U.S. under the Trump administration.

Previous flights in June and August facilitated the deportation of more than 80 Russians, according to media reports based on interviews with people on the flights.

Thousands of Russians have fled persecution at home in recent years by going to the U.S., where they can attain permission to stay by applying for asylum.

But many have been caught up in President Donald Trump's immigration crackdown.

Previous cases have seen draft dodgers and activists face imprisonment after being deported back home.

Artyom Vovchenko was one of them. After abandoning his military post — a crime punishable by up to 10 years in prison — the 26-year-old Russian went to the U.S. to seek asylum. He was deported in August, according to The New York Times.

The last time anyone saw Vovchenko, he was being carted off by security officers in a Russian airport.

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