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Why an Official's Flight to the U.S. Should Worry the Kremlin

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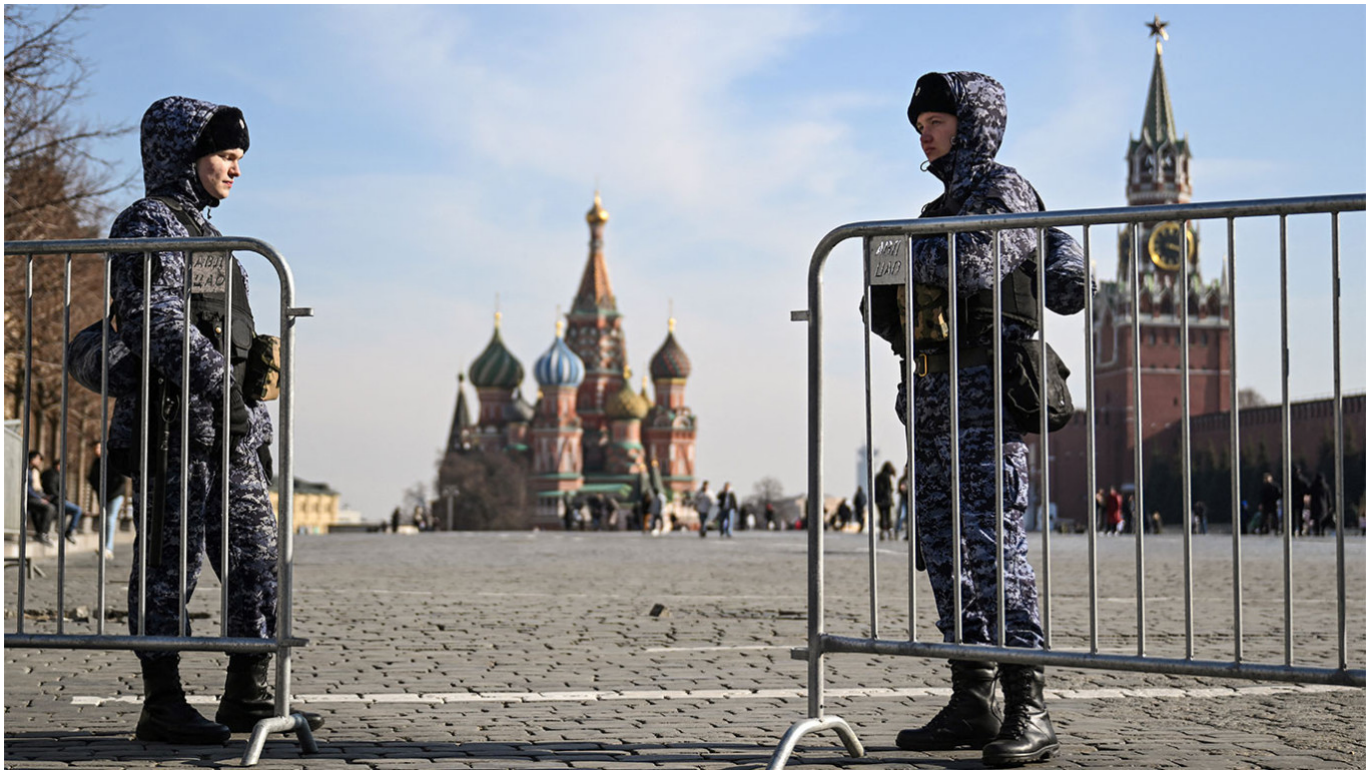

Natalia Kolesnikova / AFP

The reported flight from Russia to the U.S. of Denis Butsayev, the recently dismissed deputy minister for natural resources and ecology, fits a pattern that has emerged since the full-scale invasion of Ukraine in 2022.

It also echoes earlier moments in Soviet history, when defections tended to cluster around periods of instability: the purges of the late 1930s, the chaos following Operation Barbarossa during World War II, the aftermath of Stalin's death in 1953 and the crumbling of the Soviet Union in the late 1980s.

Defectors rarely leave for just one reason. Problems with relationships or money, disagreements with superiors or fear of punishment often play a role.

But such troubles are common in authoritarian systems like the U.S.S.R. and present-day

Russia, and most people who experience them do not defect. Something else usually pushes a person over the edge: a growing sense that the regime itself is no longer tolerable.

As in periods of instability during the Soviet era, Russia is once again experiencing a wave of defections. Today, these defections take three forms: articulated, final and geographic.

Articulated defection means speaking out against the regime and exposing its failures. Final defection means suicide. Geographic defection means leaving the country in protest or self-exile.

In the Soviet Union, all three were treated, implicitly or explicitly, as acts of treason. Suicides among Soviet officials became more frequent during Stalin's purges in the 1930s, but the dead could not be prosecuted. Those who spoke out or fled, meanwhile, often ended up imprisoned or confined to psychiatric institutions.

Modern Russia has revived much of this logic.

Articulated defection is the rarest form because the costs are so high. But there have been notable recent examples.

The exiled human rights activist Vladimir Osechkin has said that messages of support from inside Russia to his organization, Gulagu.net, surged after the Kremlin announced a "partial" military mobilization in September 2022. Exiled Russian media later reported claims from an unidentified former FSB officer that sabotage and insubordination were increasing within the agency among employees seeking to leave.

The exiled former oligarch Mikhail Khodorkovsky later claimed that less than a third of FSB employees would support Putin in the event of another mutiny like Yevgeny Prigozhin's march on Moscow in June 2023. These claims are impossible to verify independently, but they fit a trend in discursive defection within Russia. Prigozhin himself publicly denounced the Defense Ministry's handling of the war before launching his "march of justice" to demand the removal of Russia's military leadership. He died in a plane crash two months later.

More recently, in March, Ilya Remeslo, a lawyer long associated with pro-Kremlin causes, declared Putin an "illegitimate" leader and called for his resignation as a war criminal. He was subsequently committed to a psychiatric hospital for 30 days.

Then, in April, the reality TV star and influencer Viktoria Bonya complained that Putin was being kept in the dark about the country's mounting problems. A pro-Kremlin television host responded by calling her a harlot and demanding that she be labeled a "foreign agent." Bonya lives in Monaco, meaning any prosecution would most likely occur in absentia.

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The second form, final defection, is more common. In contemporary Russia, "falling out a window" has become a grim political meme. Suspicious deaths are often assumed to be assassinations. That is not necessarily the case.

Based on my assessment, some members of Russia's elite — people who once benefited from

proximity to power but who may have begun to question the system they served — appear to have taken their own lives rather than become articulated defectors. Nevertheless, their final defection can still be understood as an exit from a political order they no longer wished to support.

The third form is geographic defection, meaning physically leaving Russia. Butsayev may now belong to this category. His immediate reason for leaving appears straightforward: He reportedly became entangled in a corruption investigation and lost his job. It is unclear whether he had a deeper political motive.

His departure follows several other high-profile exits since the invasion of Ukraine. Shortly after the war began, Igor Volobuyev, an executive at Gazprombank, and Boris Bondarev, a diplomat at Russia's permanent mission to the United Nations in Geneva, resigned and publicly broke with the regime.

At least six Russian intelligence and security officers also defected publicly during the first nine months of the war. They included officers from the GRU, the FSB and, most strikingly, the Federal Protective Service (FSO), an agency that had never before experienced public defections. When stating their reasons for defecting, officers consistently repeated perceptions that the Russian government is corrupt, holding back the truth about the war and forcing officers to comply with operations they do not support.

There are almost certainly many more geographic defectors who kept quiet about their departures. Russia's history of targeting defectors abroad — from the attempted assassination of former spy Sergei Skipal in Britain in 2018 to the killing of the helicopter pilot Maxim Kuzminov in Spain in 2024 — has given former officials good reason to disappear discreetly.

Most Russian officials who harbor opposition views will keep these views to themselves. Soviet history taught generations of officials how dangerous dissent can be. But some still choose defection in one way or another.

Their actions amount to votes of no confidence in the Russian state. And taken together, they suggest something the Kremlin prefers not to acknowledge: that beneath the surface of stability, political fracture is widening inside Russia itself.

The views expressed in opinion pieces do not necessarily reflect the position of The Moscow Times.

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