The Moscow Times
30 YEARS
INDEPENDENT NEWS FROM RUSSIA

‘It Still Causes Severe Stress’: Fear of Expulsion Upends Life for Some Russian Asylum Seekers in Europe

By Brawley Benson

September 04, 2026

A plane seen landing at Moscow’s Sheremetyevo Airport. **Moskva News Agency**

Between learning a notoriously difficult local language, studying for a professional certification in economics and volunteering to help Ukrainian refugees, Nikita Belov might seem like the exact kind of Russian asylum seeker who would be welcomed in Europe.

But that didn’t stop authorities in Finland from nearly deporting him and his mother, Olga, last month. After being denied asylum and told that they faced little risk back home, the pair were “on the brink of deportation,” Belov, 25, said, before a court stepped in and ordered their case to be reconsidered.

Hundreds of Russians have landed in a similar situation in recent years. After fleeing to Europe to escape state repression, many of them manage to find a legal path to permanent

residency — but others face a harsh reality when their asylum applications are rejected at their host country's discretion.

In 2025, the EU reported that more than 10,000 Russians were ordered to leave the bloc's member states. Advocates argue that high-profile cases like the Belovs' show that some of the most vulnerable among them are slipping through the cracks.

Experts who spoke with The Moscow Times attributed the trend in rejected asylum applications to rising anti-immigration sentiment across Europe, which is pressuring governments to curb pathways to settlement.

"There is a strong wave of fighting illegal migration," said Artyom Klyga, a lawyer based in Germany who works on cases of conscientious objectors and army deserters, some of the most at-risk asylum seekers from Russia. "It's become a very popular topic for the political agenda, not only in Germany but in all of Europe."

In the Belovs' case, it's unclear to what extent broader political trends were a factor. The evidence is largely circumstantial: In Finland, a right-wing government that came to power in 2023 has taken steps to curb illegal immigration and accelerated deportations, coinciding with sweeping new EU-wide migration rules designed to expedite the processing of asylum applications.

The Belovs' lawyer told The Guardian that those changes in particular have created headaches since they came into effect this summer, adding that it's now "even more difficult to get refugee status, even with clear political opinion showing." Back in Russia, they face likely persecution for speaking out against the war in Ukraine. Their case was only reconsidered after a large public outcry.

Related article: For Russian Asylum Seekers, the United States Is Not the Land of the Free

"It certainly left a deep mark," Belov said in a phone interview with The Moscow Times, reflecting on his and his mother's ordeal, which saw them detained briefly this spring. "It still causes severe stress, sometimes even panic attacks."

"I don't know how long it will take to recover from this considering the process is not yet over and a positive decision is not guaranteed," he added.

Elsewhere, the stories of Russians facing asylum denials and expulsions cut across demographics and geography. Last year, Austria deported two men from the North Caucasus republic of Chechnya who were at risk of being conscripted back home. A few months later, Latvia ordered 841 Russian citizens to leave after they failed to undergo background checks and prove their proficiency in the local language.

One of the countries that has attracted the most attention is Germany, whose historically liberal immigration policies have made it one of the top destinations for migrants in recent decades.

During the initial months of Russia's full-scale war against Ukraine, German officials signaled that their country could serve as a safe haven for Russians fleeing conscription. The

reality, however, has fallen far short of the rhetoric: a report by German media last year revealed that 95% of asylum applications from draft-eligible Russian men had been rejected since the war began.

In fact, Germany's so-called "total protection rate" — the number of all positive decisions — for asylum seekers from Russia declined each year between 2022 and 2025, from 11.5% to 4.8%, according to government tallies shared with The Moscow Times. As of June, this year's was only slightly higher at 5.1%.

Edith Avram, a spokesperson for Germany's Federal Office for Migration and Refugees, said in an email that the asylum process is "conducted on an individual case-by-case basis."

"The applicant's country of origin and the reasons on which the application is based are important factors in the examination of an asylum application," Avram said. "However, neither factor alone determines whether protection is granted or the application is rejected."

Advocates complain that the system is mercurial, producing judgments that ignore the facts — and risks — of individual cases.

In one recent example, German immigration authorities came under scrutiny for denying an asylum request from Georgy Avaliani, a pacifist who reportedly fled the front line in Ukraine, underwent torture after being recaptured and then escaped again.

Media reported that the Federal Office for Migration and Refugees believed there was little risk of him being persecuted in Russia. In reality, deserters can face a harsh punishment of up to 10 years in prison. Klyga, who is advising Avaliani and his German lawyer, said that an appeal against the denial of his asylum request has been filed in a Berlin court.

Similarly, Said Abuyev, a 53-year-old Chechen man facing deportation from Germany, told The Moscow Times that he fears imprisonment or worse back home. He is a regime opponent who previously served four-and-a-half years in a brutal detention facility on charges of weapons possession and being part of an illegal armed group that he claims were fabricated.

When asked what awaits him in Russia, he replied: "I can't say for sure, but it won't end well."

The Chechen government is notoriously repressive and operates with near impunity, meting out severe punishments to critics and regularly drawing accusations of human rights abuses. Abuyev's case is one of many that have caught the attention of advocates who say Europe isn't doing enough to shelter asylum seekers from the broader North Caucasus region.

The prevalence of extraditions and deportations to the North Caucasus grew so alarming that in 2024 human rights watchdog Amnesty International published a report on the issue, calling on EU members to immediately halt the expulsions. But according to Rosa Dunaeva, a Chechen activist based in Austria, little has changed.

"It's double standards," Dunaeva said. "They hand over Chechens to Russia without a full risk assessment."

Across Europe, scores of similar cases are likely playing out far from public view. The asylum

process is inherently sensitive — especially when a person faces criminal charges at home — and many applicants avoid media attention to keep from drawing further scrutiny from the Russian authorities.

Klyga said that he is aware of a particularly troubling case from this summer in which a Russian man fleeing conscription was deported from Lithuania to Kaliningrad, the Russian exclave between the Baltic country and Poland. The man has been outspoken about his opposition to the war and could face prison time. Klyga requested not to publish the man's name because it could interfere with efforts to provide support to him.

Much of Europe's hesitation in granting asylum to Russians stems from fears that migration could be used as a backdoor for covert Russian operations, analysts say. With Moscow increasingly accused of orchestrating acts of sabotage across the continent, restricting entry to Russians is seen by some governments as an easy political fix.

"There is this rising pressure on European policymakers to react to this and to do something about this, and one dimension of this debate is about what can be done with migration," said Simon Papuashvili, program director for Eastern Europe and the Caucasus at the International Partnership for Human Rights, a Brussels-based NGO.

For now, Brussels looks poised to increase restrictions rather than ease them.

Related article: EU Countries Demand Stricter Visa Rules for Russians

EU foreign policy chief Kaja Kallas just this week announced that the bloc is considering cutting off visas for former Russian combatants and tightening entry restrictions for tourists.

Her comments came shortly after Germany said Russia was behind an attempted drone attack at an airport last month. One of the suspects in that incident allegedly holds a Russian passport and obtained an Italian tourist visa, German media reported.

"If it is true," Kallas said of the allegations, "it shows very clearly that visas are a tool of these people who are meaning harm to the European Union."

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