

Controlling Russians Through Travel Bans

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An important part of the Kremlin's new course of self-imposed isolation is the rapid growth in the number of Russian citizens who, for various reasons, are banned from leaving the country. These travel bans, which particularly apply to the employees working in the country's bloated security apparatus, might only increase their anti-Western paranoia. It is far easier to cultivate an image of the country as a besieged fortress when military personnel, the police and intelligence agencies are unable to see the outside world with their own eyes.

Government bans on some types of international travel creates a siege mentality and increases antagonism towards the West, writes columnist Vladimir Ryzhkov.

Bans on international travel are not new for Russia. During the Soviet period, travel was severely restricted. Anyone wanting to travel abroad had to obtain what was essentially an exit visa from Communist Party officials. Millions of people were told they could never leave the country on the pretext that they might reveal state secrets. Now, Russia is gradually reinstating this practice.

The current Constitution guarantees citizens the right to freely exit and enter the country. Article 27, part 2 reads: "Everyone may freely leave the Russian Federation. Citizens of the Russian Federation shall have the right to freely return to the Russian Federation." However, lawmakers and officials are simply ignoring that constitutional provision.

In 2010, Federal Security Service employees became the first to fall under the ban after FSB Colonel Alexander Poteyev defected to the U.S. and revealed the identities of a network of Russian spies in the U.S. and Britain. From then on, FSB members could only leave if they required urgent medical treatment not available in Russia. The exact number of FSB employees is classified, but estimates put the number at about 200,000. The exit ban is supposedly intended to prevent leaks like that committed by Poteyev.

At the same time, the Federal Bailiff Service imposed a travel ban on citizens who owe money to the government and those who have been taken to court for outstanding debt. As a result, anyone who has not paid back taxes, bank loans, alimony, fines and so on cannot leave the country. According to the Federal Bailiff Service, almost 500,000 people were affected by that travel ban in 2012, and a similar number is expected this year. Fully 190,000 people were banned from leaving Russia in the first quarter of 2014, and 70 percent of those owed money to banks. With the help of a debtors' database maintained by the Federal Bailiff Service, the authorities detain thousands of people a year as they pass through airports and railway stations on their way out of the country.

Lawmakers are now discussing travel bans for draft-dodgers and people who habitually fail to pay fines for traffic violations. Others might be refused exit because they know state secrets, are serving in the military, are defendants in a criminal case or have submitted false information on official documents.

This year's crisis in Ukraine prompted a dramatic increase in the categories of people included in the travel ban. In April, personnel from the following agencies were almost simultaneously banned from leaving Russia to visit any of about 150 countries: the Interior Ministry (1.3 million people), Defense Ministry (2 million), Federal Prison Service (326,000), Federal Drug Control Service (40,000), employees of the Prosecutor General's Office (63,000), Federal Bailiff Service employees (23,000), Federal Migration Service (34,500) and Emergency Situations Ministry employees (20,000). In all, 4 million government employees are essentially banned from leaving the country, even though the overwhelming majority hold no state secrets and could not jeopardize national security in any way.

Even those at the top of the security ministries are prevented from leaving. Defense Minister Sergei Shoigu, Federal Drug Control Service chief Viktor Ivanov, Federal Security Service head Alexander Bortnikov and others are, like the lower-ranking members of their agencies, affected by the ban and cannot visit the West. In this case, however, lifting the ban would do little, as Shoigu, Ivanov, and many other top security officials are already restricted

by Western sanctions stemming from the crisis in Ukraine.

The number of people prohibited from leaving the country has now reached almost 5 percent of the total population, an unprecedented number in Russia's post-Soviet history.

The travel bans on the government employees are handed down either through official order or through recommendations and are enforced for even the most minor employees. For example, students of the Interior Ministry University in St. Petersburg and Interior Ministry employees in Khabarovsk were forced to hand over their international passports.

Former Soviet dissident Alexander Podrabinek does not rule out the possibility that in the near future the authorities might ban additional groups from leaving the country, for example people with an outstanding conviction, those listed as "extremists" by the authorities and employees of nongovernmental organizations that are labeled as "foreign agents." This trend could lead to the full or partial construction of a new Iron Curtain for Russians.

Apart from a desire to protect the country from criticism and the "corrupting influence of the West," authorities might also hope to stem the outflow of money spent on such popular tourist destinations as Europe, Turkey, Egypt and the U.S. — thereby forcing people to spend more money at resorts in Crimea and Sochi.

Travel bans could also make it possible to keep the youth and key professionals in the country against their will. When millions of specialists and youth left East Germany for the West in the 1950s, the authorities built the Berlin Wall, sealed off the border, and used armed guards to ensure no one could escape to West Germany. As many as 5 million people have left Russia in the last 20 years, among them 20,000 PhD holders, according to data compiled by the Federal Migration Service. Judging from the current crackdown and the limits imposed on Russians' remaining freedoms, the Kremlin is finding it increasingly difficult to hold onto those who remain.

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