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Russians Claiming U.S. Asylum Face Prolonged Detention and Uncertainty

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Migrants shown walking toward the U.S.-Mexico border. **Isaac Guzman / AFP**

When Galina Kaplunova, a 26-year-old opposition activist from St. Petersburg, fled Russia with her four-year-old child and mother last summer, she hoped to find safety and a fresh start in the United States.

Instead, she found herself caught in the harsh realities of the U.S. immigration system.

In Russia, Kaplunova worked for the late Kremlin foe Alexei Navalny's Anti-Corruption Foundation, which was blacklisted as "extremist" in 2021, as well as with pro-peace presidential hopefuls Boris Nadezhdin and Yekaterina Duntsova. She had also been detained at opposition rallies.

After arriving in Mexico, Kaplunova and her mother registered with CBP One, the U.S. government's official app for asylum seekers at the southern border. They waited 36 days in

the Mexican border city of Tijuana for their appointment — a very short time compared to many other applicants.

“We were incredibly lucky,” she recalled in a conversation with The Moscow Times.

Just hours after crossing the border, Kaplunova was summoned for an interview with a border security officer where — after answering a few “generic biographical questions” — she was told she would be sent to a detention facility.

“It was nearing midnight and my child was sleeping in my arms when an officer handed me a piece of paper stating that I was to be sent to a detention center. I looked at the officer and said: ‘I can’t go right now, I have a child’,” she recalled. “But he just told me through an interpreter that my child would remain under the custody of ICE [U.S. Immigration and Customs Enforcement].”

“It is one of those moments when you really don’t have a choice — you can’t go back and can only agree with whatever they tell you,” she said.

Kaplunova spent nearly two months in detention. It took her another 19 days after being released to reunite with her son, who had been placed in a foster family. Her mother, a 45-year-old sales manager from St. Petersburg, remains in detention.

A growing flow of asylum seekers

Since the Kremlin’s invasion of Ukraine, a growing number of Russians have turned to the CBP One program with hopes of seeking refuge in the U.S. According to official data, 118,000 Russian citizens have registered with CBP One since 2022.

However, once across the border, many Russian applicants are held in immigration centers for months as they await decisions on their asylum cases — a trend that appears to have become more common in recent months.

Their experiences have led some immigration lawyers and Russian opposition politicians to decry what they see as “discrimination” toward the Russian passport. Yet others note that it is merely an example of how the often-criticized U.S. immigration system functions for people of all nationalities.

At least 900 Russian citizens who have used CBP One are currently in detention, American immigration lawyer Julia Nikolaev told The Moscow Times, citing her own calculations. The real number, she said, is likely much higher.

The Moscow Times spoke to five Russian citizens who were placed in detention after using the CBP One program to cross the U.S. border and apply for asylum.

Four of them described facing harsh conditions including being held in detention for several months, moved between facilities in different states and — like Kaplunova — separated from their spouses or minor children.

Separated families, long detentions and an uncertain fate

Until recently, most Russian asylum seekers using the CBP One program had undergone the same process, immigration lawyers say: after submitting their applications, they would receive an invitation from U.S. border authorities to enter the country.

While some were briefly held in detention centers, the majority were allowed to remain free while awaiting a decision on their asylum claims.

But "something happened within the system in May 2024 and Russians began to be sent to detention centers en masse," said Yelena Kuzmina, who leads the Detentions project at Russian America for Democracy in Russia (RADR), a U.S.-based NGO working with the Russian diaspora.

Inside these detention centers, detainees often face overcrowded cells, poor sanitary conditions and limited access to legal assistance.

Danila Dolotov, a 30-year-old doctor, fled Russia with his wife and crossed the U.S.-Mexican border through CBP One in September 2023.

In a phone interview, he described the conditions in the detention center where he spent six months as "horrific."

"The air was filled with an unbearable odor, as dozens of men were confined in a single space. Sanitation conditions were extremely poor," said Dolotov, whose asylum bid is due to be reviewed by a U.S. court in 2026.

Cells housed between 100 to 120 people with open toilets and poor sanitation, he said.

Activist Kaplunova recalled the "difficult" experience of being transferred from a California detention center to a facility in Arizona, with no water provided during the 12-hour minivan ride in the summer heat.

"When we arrived in Arizona, we were tormented further," said Kaplunova. "After taking a shower…we were sent to a freezing room with no warm clothes…and denied water again."

Prolonged detentions of four to six months or more can take a toll on asylum seekers' health, lawyers warn, as these facilities are ill-equipped to provide adequate medical treatment.

While living conditions vary between detention centers, navigating immigration court may pose the greatest challenge to refugees stranded in these facilities.

Many struggle to find or pay for a qualified lawyer and can lose access to vital evidence for their asylum claims when border officers confiscate their devices, said RADR President Dmitry Valuev.

'Discrimination' or national security?

The rise in detentions of Russian passport holders who used the CBP One program has led to a debate over whether the practice is discriminatory — or merely how the system works for

asylum seekers of all nationalities.

Since invading Ukraine in 2022, the Kremlin has intensified its crackdown on Russian civil society, forcing thousands of opposition figures, journalists and activists to flee abroad.

Russian opposition politician Ilya Yashin, himself a former political prisoner in Russia who was released in last year's historic exchange between Moscow and the West, argued that people running from "war, repression and [President Vladimir] Putin's prisons" need to be protected.

He recently met with officials from the Senate, the State Department and the Biden administration in Washington, where he said he urged officials to expedite the processing of Russian asylum applications.

"According to lawyers and asylum seekers, no matter what kind of [politically motivated criminal] cases individuals have, how many times they have been detained or even if they have won a case against the Russian authorities in the European Court of Human Rights — none of it matters [to the U.S. authorities]," Yashin told The Moscow Times. "They still end up in detention."

Lawyer Nikolaev said the main problem was that asylum seekers using the official CBP One program to enter the country were still being detained.

"They entered through the established legal procedure. They have a temporary status that allows them to stay in the U.S. and apply for political asylum. They didn't crawl through tunnels or climb over fences — they came and entered through an official border checkpoint with permission from border officials," Nikolaev told The Moscow Times.

However, according to lawyer Liya Djamilova and immigration expert Marina Sokolovskaya, it is standard practice in accordance with U.S. law to hold asylum seekers in detention facilities regardless of nationality.

"What is happening now with Russian speakers in immigration prisons has been happening to everyone else for many years," Djamilova told The Moscow Times. "It's just that the U.S. has never seen such a large influx of people from post-Soviet countries before."

National security concerns could also play a role given the increasingly adversarial relations between the Kremlin and the West as well as the risk of terrorist activity spilling over from Russia, the Caucasus and Central Asia.

Just this month, U.S. authorities arrested former Wagner mercenary Timur Praliev, who holds both Russian and Kazakh passports, after he illegally crossed the border.

According to the Department of Homeland Security, all individuals who use CBP One are "thoroughly screened and vetted, and individuals who pose a national security or public safety concern are detained."

A leaked memo circulated by the media last year revealed that asylum seekers from Georgia, Moldova, Kyrgyzstan, Russia, Tajikistan and Uzbekistan were allegedly being singled out for expedited removal.

According to this memo, the individual would not necessarily be deported — the asylum application would simply be reviewed through an expedited process, Sokolovskaya said. The Moscow Times could not independently verify the memo's authenticity.

"These six countries were likely targeted because obtaining political asylum in the U.S. has become a commercial enterprise for them, and the number of dangerous individuals exceeded certain thresholds. For this reason, people started being sent to detention [en masse]," Sokolovskaya told The Moscow Times.

ICE did not respond to The Moscow Times' requests for comment.

The Trump administration this month shut down the CBP One program.

Those who registered with the program before the shutdown now face an uncertain future as they continue to wait in detention.

Among them is Kaplunova's mother, whose immigration case was separated from her activist daughter's and transferred to Louisiana.

Her mother's health, she said, has deteriorated since being placed in an immigration facility.

"My mom started to suffer from high blood pressure. She was diagnosed with hypertension and the doctors told her that she needed to get out of the facility as soon as possible," Kaplunova said.

"But [it seems that] no one has any intention of letting her go."

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