

The Case for Opening Our Doors to Russians Fleeing Putin - as Well as Ukrainians

Washington Post columnist Catherine Rampell explains how it can benefit the US economy while "draining Putin's brain."

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The Russian-language sign in this image says "exit."

Much attention has been paid to the massive Ukrainian refugee crisis caused by Vladimir Putin's attack on that country. Many commentators, myself included, have advocated that Western nations do more to take in Ukrainian refugees. In recent weeks, the US, Canada, and other countries have in fact opened their doors to Ukrainians more than before, though much more can and should be done.

But the US and its allies have done little to open the door to the growing number of Russians fleeing Vladimir Putin's increasingly repressive regime. In a recent column, Catherine Rampell of the *Washington Post* makes the case for doing so:

The United States, coordinating with Western allies, has deployed many economic weapons against Russia.... But we haven't, to date, gone after the country's most precious resource: its people.

I don't mean *attacking* the Russian people. I mean *welcoming* them here, particularly if they have significant economic and national security value to Russia....

We should start by expediting the most compelling humanitarian cases in the region. In Russia, these include dissidents and journalists risking their necks to challenge Vladimir Putin's unprovoked war. But we should also actively court those who might be less political: the technical, creative, high-skilled workers upon whom Russia's economic (and military) fortunes depend...

Already, Russian talent is rushing for the exits, in what might represent the seventh great wave of Russian emigration over the past century.

An estimated 50,000 to 70,000 IT specialists alone have recently left, according to a Russian technology trade group, which predicts another 100,000 might leave by the end of April. Others in the outbound stampede include entrepreneurs, researchers and artists. The pace of this brain

drain is especially impressive given how difficult sanctions have made it to buy plane tickets or otherwise conduct transactions across borders, as well as how expensive travel has become....

Russian self-exiles are mostly flooding into nearby countries such as Turkey, Armenia and Georgia, but we could smooth their pathway to the United States. Congress already has one blueprint: In early February, the House passed the America Competes Act, which would, among other things, increase immigration of entrepreneurs and PhD scientists from around the world (not just Russia). Alternatively, Congress could tailor a measure toward Russian STEM talent, or the Biden administration could make Russians more broadly eligible for refugee status....

Scaling up immigration and refugee admissions is both the right thing to do and in our own interests. Refugees and other emigres have a long history of supercharging U.S. innovation, winning Nobel Prizes and contributing to our national security. These include Soviet defectors during the Cold War and a larger-scale exodus of mathematicians and scientists after the collapse of the Soviet Union. We would benefit from a comparable influx of talent today.

But the prospect of doing this *while* imminently draining Russia's talent pool should make the policy even more attractive.

Rampell goes on to point out that we should also allow Russian students already in the United States to stay here. At the very least, we should reject cruel and counterproductive proposals to expel them, advanced by some Democratic politicians.

She is by no means the only advocate of this approach to combating Putin's regime. Steve Chapman of the *Chicago Tribune*, conservative science writer Robert Zubrin in the *National Review*, Cato Institute immigration policy expert David Bier, and Canadian political commentator Scott Gilmore have made similar arguments. I myself did so in a March 8 *New York Times* article, where I also argued for taking in more Ukrainians. Along related lines, I and others have advanced the idea of giving refuge to Russian soldiers who surrender in Ukraine (a proposal, to my knowledge, first developed by Duke University economist Timur Kuran).

I would add there is a strong moral case for giving refuge to Russians fleeing Putin, as well as a strategic one. Putin's government has become increasingly repressive - to the point of imposing a 15-year prison sentence for the crime of merely referring to the war in Ukraine as a "war" or an "invasion," rather than a "special military operation." Russians should not be forced to live under Putin's repression any more than Ukrainians, or anyone else. It is unjust to condemn people to life under tyranny, merely because of arbitrary circumstances of birth.

I hope Rampell's work and that of others will generate greater support for these ideas. Perhaps even enough that policymakers will begin to take serious notice.