

From hospitality into hostility: Russians in Germany feel the backlash from Ukraine war

Erik Kirschbaum - LA Times

Ilja Kaplan left his hometown of Moscow as a young man 32 years ago for a new life in Berlin and never went back. Yet he never let go of his Russian identity and opened a Russian restaurant called Pasternak — a place where Germans, Ukrainians, Russians and many others have been merrily eating, drinking and also working for a quarter-century.



Ilja Kaplan stands outside one of his Russian restaurants in Berlin, where, he says, the war in Ukraine has led to Germans boycotting his eateries. (Erik Kirschbaum / For The Times)© (Erik Kirschbaum / For The Times)

But that immigrant success story was suddenly under threat after Moscow ordered its forces to invade Ukraine in February, which triggered a wave of Russophobia here in a land with one of the world's biggest Russian diaspora communities.

Not only did many Germans, shocked by the unprovoked attack, feel a need to “do their part” by boycotting Pasternak and other Russian businesses, but also Kaplan started receiving warnings that his “Dr. Zhivago”-themed restaurant would be firebombed and that Ukrainian thugs were on their way to rough up his cooks and waiters.

The situation felt surreal given that Kaplan had publicly condemned Russia's war on its neighbor and that most of his restaurant's employees are Ukrainian. Only a handful are Russian.

“I can’t really show you what it looks like in my soul, but it hurts,” said Kaplan, a friendly 60-year-old with white hair and sad eyes.

“We were always apolitical, and we’re totally against this war. But I’m Russian and [Russia started this war](#) and now we’re facing this hostility — and our business is suffering. Why? I understand people are upset. But what did we have to do with Putin and this war?”

Kaplan and many of the estimated 3 million people with Russian passports or roots living in Germany have been feeling the backlash to Russian President Vladimir Putin’s 7-month-old attack on Ukraine. They report being ostracized, discriminated against and taunted even when they try to make clear that they oppose the war.

At the same time, they acknowledge tensions within their own community, which includes a considerable number of immigrants who [consume Russia’s state-dominated media and support Putin](#). In early April, about 900 supporters of the Russian leader held a widely criticized car rally through the center of Berlin, waving giant Russian flags and beeping their horns.

That same month, the Federal Criminal Police Office reported that more than 1,700 crimes, including 162 acts of violence, had been committed in Germany against Russians, Belarusians and Ukrainians “in connection with the war” during the conflict’s first two months. The crimes ranged from insults and threats to physical assaults and property damage.



A woman holds an anti-Vladimir Putin poster during a protest at Berlin's Brandenburg Gate against the war in Ukraine. (Markus Schreiber / Associated Press)

Business at Pasternak, in the trendy Berlin neighborhood of Prenzlauerberg, has fallen by 30% since the war started — even after Kaplan tweaked the menu to turn dishes such as the “Fruehstueck Moskau” (Moscow Breakfast) into simply “Fruehstueck.”

His dream of doubling the number of restaurants he owns, from eight to 16, with one in each of Berlin's districts, now seems hopeless.

"It feels like all the work of the last 30 years has been destroyed," Kaplan said. "We survived the corona pandemic and I had a future. Now it feels like I've got no future."

Germany's Russian diaspora comprises the ethnic Germans whose families immigrated to Russia starting in the 18th century and returned in the 1990s, after the fall of the Soviet Union, along with large numbers of ethnic Russian and Jewish immigrants from Russia who [began settling here during the late 1980s](#).

Many of the more recent immigrants have tried to retain remnants of their culture and especially language while integrating more or less successfully into Germany's powerhouse economy and way of life.

The war in Ukraine and the attendant backlash in Germany, as well as in other parts of Europe, brought to an abrupt end a brief but happy era of good relations between Germans and those in their midst with Russian roots — and between the two biggest countries in Europe, in spite of a turbulent mutual history marred by wars and upheaval.

Successive post-Cold War German governments embraced "Wandel durch Handel" (change through trade), the notion that there would never again be war on the continent if Russia could be inextricably lashed to Western Europe's economies.

German chancellors past and present, who made their country [heavily dependent on Russian fossil fuels](#) in the process, now admit they got it wrong and were terribly naïve.

German anger over Ukraine is such that Larissa Shevikova, 82, who has lived in Berlin since moving to Communist East Germany in 1981 from her hometown of [Leningrad, now St. Petersburg](#), said she is even being spurned by local doctors when she tries to get appointments.

"There's fear among my Russian friends," said Shevikova, who added that a friend had been recently beaten up for speaking Russian to her mother and ended up in a hospital emergency room.

"When we meet in public, we now try to speak [Russian] quietly. ... I used to have friendly conversations on the street with a neighbor who is a police officer when he was walking his dog. Now when I try to talk with him, he just says, 'Nein, Nein,' and walks away."



About 100,000 people attend a pro-Ukraine rally in Berlin on Feb. 27, three days after Russia invaded its neighbor. (Michael Sohn / Associated Press)

The animosity can extend even to the playground.

"I was speaking Russian with my two daughters when two teenage boys came over and asked what language we were talking," said Alevtina Enders, 37, who remains unabashedly proud of her family's Russian traditions three decades after her parents moved to Germany. When she said she and her girls were speaking Russian, the youths shouted obscenities at them.

Calls by Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelensky and European Union countries such as Estonia, Denmark and Poland for the EU to ban visas for Russian tourists have sent a further chill through the Russian diaspora because many worry it could cut them off from their families even more. The EU already [banned flights from Russia](#) earlier this year.

A moratorium on visas could slam shut the exit door for political dissidents and anyone fleeing Putin's autocratic rule after tens of thousands of Russians fled in the first months of the war.

EU foreign ministers are scheduled to discuss the proposal during meetings this week, but a bloc-wide ban is unlikely because of opposition from Germany — in part because many Germans, including former Chancellor Willy Brandt, survived the Nazi era thanks to asylum in Sweden and other safe havens.

Chancellor Olaf Scholz has already spoken out against any EU-wide ban, even though [Baltic nations such as Estonia and Finland](#) have started blocking or severely limiting the number of entering Russians.

More likely to be approved than an outright prohibition are measures to make the visa process more difficult and cumbersome for Russians.

"Traveling to and from Russia is definitely hard enough already, and a travel ban from the EU would make it more dangerous for Russians — they would feel more stuck in the country, and that's not a good thing," said Asya Chavdar, a 32-year-old Russian living in Berlin.



Asya Chavdar, right, a Russian who lives in Berlin, from Russia, married American Dennis Harris from Simi Valley in the German capital this month. (Erik Kirschbaum / For The Times)

Chavdar got married last week to Dennis Harris, an American from Simi Valley who is working remotely from the German capital for his Boston-based company. Harris, 37, was able to fly his family in directly from California for the wedding, whereas Chavdar's parents had to make a [circuitous car journey to Lithuania](#) before they could board a flight to Berlin.

Chavdar, who has lived in Berlin since 2017, said that she has not experienced any direct hostility from Germans at work or on the streets but that some friends haven't been as fortunate.

"The climate has definitely changed," she said, noting that her application for a tourist visa to travel on a honeymoon to the United States with her new husband had been denied.

"I'm just hoping the world will change and will be a better place soon." Andrej Hermlin, a Berlin musician, has kept a Russian number called "Ochi Chernye" ("Dark Eyes") in his swing dance band's repertoire despite the rising anti-Russian sentiment.

"We were playing the song a few weeks ago, and there was an elderly German woman sitting in the front row waving a big thumbs-down against the song," said Hermlin, who is proud of his Russian roots and language skills.

"After the show I asked her what was wrong, and she said it was [unacceptable that we played Russian music](#). I told her about my mother and how she started learning German in 1943 in Moscow because she loved the language and wanted to read German literature," Hermlin said.

“I told her that if my mother could learn German during that war, then she ought to be able to listen to a Russian song now. She said she hadn’t thought of it that way.”