

Opinion | Lionel Laurent, Columnist

Brain Drain From Putin's Russia Is Far From Over

As we approach the third year of the war in Ukraine, Moscow's loss could be the West's gain.

20 February 2024 at 05:00 GMT

By **Lionel Laurent**

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A Yandex cycle courier rides in Moscow City in 2021. Source: Bloomberg

It's the end of an era for Russia's best-known tech company, Yandex NV, once hailed as the country's answer to Alphabet Inc.'s Google and valued at \$30 billion before the invasion of Ukraine. This month, it agreed to sell its domestic business for about \$5.2 billion, a cut-price level for the Russian tycoons picking it up under the Kremlin's watch.

Yet the deal also hints at a wartime brain drain of scientific and engineering talent that the West could do more to capture.

Yandex has a controversial reputation: Alexey Navalny, whose death has outraged leaders and prompted protests across Europe, had said the company was responsible for spreading Russian lies. (The European Union agreed, Yandex did not.) Co-founder

Arkady Volozh, who now publicly opposes the war, is pushing to be taken off Europe's sanctions list and says he's helped "thousands of engineers" leave the country: "They will be an asset wherever they land."

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An estimated 11% to 28% of Russian developers have left the country since the outbreak of war, according to research cited by *Science*, and fear of more departures is apparently what stopped the Kremlin from nationalizing Yandex outright. While most of the company's assets and 26,000 staff will stay in Russia, they've been separated from a new entity employing about 1,300 people operating abroad in hubs like Finland or Serbia and focused on artificial intelligence.

The pressure is even more acute in the world of scientific research. Russia has lost more than 50,000 researchers in the past five years, according to a senior member of the Russian Academy of Sciences cited by Interfax, as a crackdown on civil society and on wartime dissent takes its toll. Independent publication *Novaya Gazeta* recently identified at least 270 high-ranking academics who had left since the war began, with half having signed an open letter condemning it.

This is not to ignore Ukraine's own human scars, with millions of its people having sought refuge in the EU and an estimated 18% of its scientists having left the country, according to a study co-authored by economist Gaetan de Rassenfosse.

There's an opportunity for Europe and the US to do more to accommodate scientific exiles from both Russia and Ukraine as the war enters its third grueling year, especially if it keeps research going while depriving Vladimir Putin of human capital.

That's the message I got from two researchers, Oleksandr Gamayun and Mikhail Burtsev – Ukrainian and Russian, respectively – who both work at the London Institute for Mathematical Sciences, a modern-day ivory tower housed in the 18th-century Royal Institution in Mayfair. They're among recipients of 10 three-year funded positions at the

institute for outstanding physicists and mathematicians from Ukraine, Russia and Belarus.

Burtsev, who signed a letter along with other Russian scientists condemning the war, is an expert in AI who left his homeland in September 2022. He praises the freedom to continue doing independent research, and adds that, while the brain drain has had little impact on the war so far, the effect will be “big” over time. Gamayun, a physicist who was in Poland when war broke out, is also happy to have found security and freedom to continue his research – and as for Russian scientists, he says they should be judged “case by case.”

Although 10 fellowships are a nice to have, they are a drop in the ocean compared to the demand out there. “Any initiative should be taken very positively ... But I believe that it is not enough,” says Yuri Kovalev, of the Max Planck Institute for Radio Astronomy, who comments that, without more support on the ground, Western boycotts of Russian science risk giving Putin a propaganda boost. Various other humanitarian programs are trying to raise extra funds, but they’re still few and far between: France’s PAUSE program, which in 2023 offered one-year renewable financial support to 23 Russian and 20 Ukrainian researchers, expects 200 requests this year and is trying to raise €3 million (\$3.2 million) for 2025.

Obviously, this kind of outreach needs to tread carefully. Accommodating exiles shouldn’t turn into an escape clause for those aiding and abetting Russia’s military-industrial complex. And the current high-intensity nature of the fighting means that politicians are more focused on obtaining more bullets rather than more physicists.



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But there could be other advantages for host countries in the long run. The parallel with 1930s Germany is instructive: If just one Einstein emerged from the current wave of exiles from Putin’s war, wouldn’t that make it worth it? “Just imagine what would have happened if Britain or the US wouldn’t have hosted German scientists during the Nazi regime,” Joachim Hornegger, president of the FAU, told a conference last year. The US

push to profit from these scientists after the war also helped deliver an estimated \$10 billion in patents and know-how.

If Yandex's co-founder is right, Russia's brain drain isn't over. If Putin is alive to the threat, maybe the West should be too.

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