

OPINION: Sweden should welcome Russians who don't want to kill Ukrainians

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Finland, Poland and the Baltic states are stopping Russians from leaving Russia. It would be a tragedy if Sweden did the same, says David Crouch.

An iron curtain is descending across Europe. But in contrast to the beginning of the Cold War, the curtain is being drawn down by EU countries – not Russia.

Any day now, Finland is poised to ban Russians from entering the country on tourist visas, to keep out men who want to avoid being drafted to fight in Ukraine. Announcing the policy, the country's foreign minister said Finland was becoming "a transit country for Russians who want to leave their homeland for fear of being forced into war, and this traffic could harm Finland's international position". Opinion polls put 70 percent of the public in favour of a ban.

The number of Russians entering Finland doubled following Putin's imposition a week ago of a "partial" mobilisation of men for the war effort in Ukraine. Finland's Border Guard service is demanding [a border fence 2.5m to 4m tall, topped with barbed wire](#), to keep the Russians out – an idea that taken seriously by the government.

Our Nordic neighbour is following a trend: the Baltics and Poland have already put an end to visas for Russians, including conscientious objectors to the war. The Czech Republic said last week that Russian deserters will not receive asylum.

"We see them not as antiwar people, we see them as anti-fighting-the-war people," Gabrielius Landsbergis, Lithuania's foreign minister, told the New York Times. "They were not fleeing Russia when Bucha happened, when Kyiv was shelled or when any other horrific things happened in Ukraine."

Latvia's foreign minister chipped in: "Many Russians who now flee Russia because of mobilisation were fine with killing Ukrainians. They did not protest then. It is not right to consider them as conscientious objectors. There are considerable security risks admitting them and plenty of countries outside EU to go to."

The EU is under pressure from some of these countries to ban Russian tourists, and has already made it much harder for Russians to get tourist visas. But the bloc is divided. Politicians from across the political spectrum in Germany, for example, want to offer asylum to Russian deserters.

Sweden is starting to debate this question. As a shiny new member of Nato, some Swedes feel we need to show how tough we can be towards the Russian threat. And with a new government keen to stress its anti-immigration credentials, Stockholm may also be tempted to punish Russian travellers because of their brutal government.

In a situation already tragic beyond the imagination, banning Russian draft dodgers would only add

to the tragedy in Europe.

Men of fighting age have been brought up on a diet of state propaganda, pumping nationalism, racism, militarism and hatred of the West into the Russian mainstream. Access to independent and social media has been extremely restricted. Opposition to the “military operation” in Ukraine is punishable by 15 years in jail.

In these circumstances, the mood has changed slowly, fuelled by snippets of official information, incidents such as the death of a friend, social media posts and kitchen conversations. But the steady drip drip of doubt and fear has filled the cup to overflowing.

Then came last week’s mobilisation, and the pace of change accelerated. Family men without military experience are being dragooned into the army and sent to the front line. A wave of anger has swept across the nation, with arson attacks on army recruitment offices, thousands of arrests and a revolt in Dagestan. The country’s security service itself says 261,000 men [fled Russia in barely a week](#). At one point there was a queue of cars 13km long at the border with Kazakhstan.

For EU nations to turn away Russians who don’t want to fight in Ukraine is to abandon them in their hour of need. At the very moment when they are most open to alternative facts about the war in Ukraine, we would conform to the Kremlin’s propaganda picture of the West as hostile, self-interested and Russian-hating.

Denying draft dodgers the right to get out of Russia means painting them all as representatives of an enemy with whom we are at war. There might be some short-term political benefits in terms of “uniting the nation”, but this would leave a deep scar on the European psyche.

The debate in Europe has not gone unnoticed in the White House, where the US National Security Council has cautioned against seeing all Russians as universally responsible for the disaster in Ukraine.

“We also continue to believe it’s important to draw a line between the actions of the Russian government and the Russian people,” a spokesperson [told the Financial Times](#). “We wouldn’t want to close off pathways to refuge and safety for Russia’s dissidents or others who are vulnerable to human rights abuses.”

Sweden has a history of welcoming men who don’t want to fight in unjust wars. Between 1967 and 1973, Sweden granted asylum to around 800 Americans fleeing the Vietnam war. Fifty years later, the [decision](#) by the European Court of Justice that Syrian draft dodgers can claim asylum in Europe gives Sweden the legal basis to extend this right to Russians.

What is happening now in Russia could be the beginning of the end of the war in Ukraine, and of the Putin regime. Sweden should welcome with open arms all Russians who would rather get out than be sent to kill Ukrainians. And we should pressure other EU countries to do the same.

It is likely that Russia will soon close its own borders to stop men from escaping. But let’s not give them an excuse to do so.

David Crouch is the author of [Almost Perfekt: How Sweden Works and What Can We Learn From It](#). He is a freelance journalist and a lecturer in journalism at Gothenburg University.

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