Is ‘Moscow on the Med’ coming to its end?

No EU country has a more visible Russian presence than Cyprus. On this island Russians protest for and against the war in Ukraine, ties of friendship and family are broken, and all of them only see uncertainty in the future. ‘What if the EU throws out all Russians?’

Jorn De Cock

From Limassol, Cyprus

At first glance, it is almost a jolly bunch gathering on a sun-drenched Saturday afternoon, in the renovated old harbour of the coastal city of Limassol. They joke and laugh, but the slogans they carry are bitterly serious. 'Stop Putin, stop the war.' 'My Russia is in jail.' 'Free the political prisoners', or even 'The Russian army rapes children'. These are not Ukrainians living in Cyprus - there are those, too - but the island's Kremlin-critical Russians.

'We started with a group last year when opposition leader Aleksey Navalny was imprisoned,' says Evgenii, 38, an IT expert and one of the initiators. ‘We were a handful at first, then a hundred. Because of the war in Ukraine, everything accelerated. Now there are many hundreds of us. We now organise more rallies and we also participate in the protests of the Ukrainians here. Our petition to expel the Russian diplomatic staff in Cyprus has already collected three thousand signatures.'

'When the war broke out on 24 February, I felt as if someone in my immediate family had died,' says Natalia, 42, who works in logistics. ‘I couldn't eat, sleep or work. Every day I still cry at the daily horror over there, and at the same time I feel guilty towards my fantastic Ukrainian friends. It is as if I myself am doing all this horror to them. Many Russians here did not know how to react. They were pleasantly surprised when they found out about our protests.’

Natalia moved to Cyprus 23 years ago, but she feels morally obliged to continue protesting. 'I came here for my studies and decided that I didn't want to be stuck in Russia, with no future. Leaving was difficult, there are good people there. It's just a shame that they have such a president. I feel I can do more for Russia here than there.'

In Moscow, these demonstrators would risk fifteen years in prison; in Limassol, the EU’s free speech reigns. Here only two policemen watch curiously, from their bicycles. The activists stroll carefree along the coastal promenade. They wave white-blue-white flags, an 'alternative Russian flag' that activists designed when the invasion of Ukraine began. One of those who designed the new flag, also walks in the demonstration in Limassol, Alexander, 28.

‘We wanted to remove the red colour from the current Russian tricolour', he says. ‘For us, red stands for blood and aggression, for imperialism and the urge to conquer.’ White-blue-white looks a lot more cheerful, but Putin's Russia does not consider the new flag a laughing matter. ‘I was still living in Moscow when the war broke out. Two friends there were arrested for waving this flag', Alexander says. 'I myself left in April when the repression began to take hold.'

Despite his young age, he has been an activist for democracy in Russia for years, and like thousands of educated, ambitious Russian youth, in recent months he just packed a suitcase and left. However, his tourist visa for Cyprus will expire soon. What will he do then? ‘Going back to Russia is not a good idea for him', Natalia says dryly.

**Fratricidal conflict**

Not every Russian in Cyprus thinks like Evgenii, Natalia and the other demonstrators in the old port. In a coffee bar in Limassol, the 'most Russian' of cities in Cyprus, we meet Denis, 40. The trajectory of Denis' life, before he moved to Cyprus for professional reasons, almost sounds like a resumé from the old Soviet Union: born in Kazakhstan, moved to Omsk in Siberia at the age of 11, then his military service, after which he signed up for 'two more years in the Navy in the Pacific Fleet and two years in the special forces and intelligence services', he says.

Then he went to study law in Krasnodar, near the Black Sea. In 2014, the year Russia annexed the Crimean peninsula, he moved there for three years. 'My specialisation is land registration, there was a lot of work in that in Crimea at the time. Those transitional years were painful: there were Western sanctions against Crimea, Ukraine cut off the water supply, only Russia invested a lot of money. Yet I have only good memories of it. But then I got the chance to move to Cyprus for my company. I immediately liked it here. As a child I already loved the sea, and I found the love of my life here. We have a three-year-old son.’

Denis does not speak in slogans, but in elaborate reasoning. ‘I try not to be emotional and to look at things critically', he says. Denis does consistently use the Kremlin term 'special military operation' for the war in Ukraine, which he says was 'an inevitable consequence of a crisis of civilisations'.

'Russia could not react differently than it does now,' he says. 'After the end of the bipolar world, with the US and the Soviet Union as superpowers, only the US is left as a superempire. They are trying to get hold of all energy resources and are now creating a clash between Russia and the European Union, using Ukraine as an instrument.'

Denis thus sees Ukraine as a 'chess piece' in a world of geostrategy, where 'Russia was obliged to protect the Don Basin'. Then he refers to a 'rule from our childhood': 'If two brothers are fighting, no one else should come between them. It is painful that this actually did happen.'

The consequences of the current EU sanctions could hit his life hard, he admits. Denis is the manager and main shareholder of a company that runs hotels and restaurants in Italy. ‘Now direct flights with Russia have been abolished', he begins to sum up a list. ‘It has become impossible for Russians to open a bank account here, the accounts of some clients have been frozen. There is already Russophobia - recently I was refused a rental car in Italy. If there will also be a ban on speaking Russian, or if Cyprus denies passports to Russians, we might be forced to leave.'

Such drastic measures have not been taken anywhere in Europe, but the uncertainty Denis feels about his future is shared by many thousands of Russians in Cyprus. Moreover, there is an internal fratricidal conflict going on. Every Russian we speak to has lost friends because of the conflict - their disagreement runs too deep. ‘I haven't spoken to my mother in Russia for a while, because she watches television all day and repeats all the propaganda,' someone says. ‘On Facebook I have changed my family name, so that I can continue to criticise the war without affecting her.’

Whereas Russians like Denis are worried about EU sanctions, Russians who are against the war are worried about the possible consequences of their views for friends and family within Russia. ‘I don't want to sound paranoid, but you just don't know where this is all leading', another says. That is also the reason why all Russian interlocutors only want to appear in the newspaper with their first name, most of them also do not want to be photographed.

**Selling the homeland**

Where does the romance between Russians and Cyprus come from? Different figures circulate about exactly how many Russians live in Cyprus. Officially, 18,000 are registered in the Republic of Cyprus - since the 1974 war this is de facto the Greek-speaking southern part of the island, with a population of about eight hundred thousand. In contrast, most estimates speak of forty to fifty thousand Russians in Cyprus. In Limassol alone, one fifth of the population of 150,000 is said to be Russian.

In 'normal' years also masses of tourists arrive. In the peak year of 2019, before the covid epidemic hit, Cyprus received four million tourists. No less than a quarter of them flew in from Russia and Ukraine. As a distant island, Cyprus is not a member of the Schengen area. Therefore, the country was able to offer tourist visas with a simple, fast procedure. Russian became the most common language alongside Greek and English on Cypriot streets, at least in the coastal towns, where the sun shines seven months a year. Except that now, due to EU sanctions, there are no quick visas and no direct air connections.

Russia's ambassador in Nicosia went into overdrive in March, exclaiming that Cyprus was 'shooting itself in the foot' by introducing EU sanctions against Russia. 'Where is Cyprus going to get its Russian tourists now?' he sneered in an interview on a Cypriot television channel. 'They are not going to come, where are they going to go? To Turkey, is that what you want?'

Ever since the Turkish invasion of 1974, Turkey has been the arch-enemy of 'Greek Cyprus'. The ambassador clearly wanted to hurt the Cypriots - which was not appreciated. In fact, he was right about something: for the Russian middle class, it was often a matter of choosing between Cyprus, the Turkish Riviera or the Egyptian Red Sea for summer holidays. The ambassador only forgot to mention that in the current crisis the Russian middle class has other priorities than a summer holiday. Keeping their heads above water in their own country, foremost.

In general, affable Cyprus has a good relationship with the Russians. In a recent Eurobarometer poll, Christos Panayiotides, a retired accountant who writes valued political columns for the Cyprus Mail and Alithia newspapers, noticed ed that of all EU countries, Cyprus was the least critical of Russia's invasion of Ukraine. While four in five EU citizens believe that 'the Russian authorities are primarily responsible for the current situation', just over half of Cypriots do *not* think so.

Historical or political reasons are sometimes given for this figure. Like Russia, Greek Cyprus is Orthodox Christian. In the European Union the country is a latecomer, with its accession in 2004, and it is still not a member of NATO. The presence of Turkish occupying troops in Northern Cyprus, among other things, makes this dossier complicated. Archenemy Turkey on the other hand is a member of NATO since 1952.

Did the Eurobarometer then mainly express chagrin? Columnist Panayiotides puts such 'secondary factors' into perspective and points to internal contradictions. ‘The only score where Cyprus came close to the rest of Europe was in begging for EU funds to level the impact of rising energy prices', he wrote in a column in May. No less than 94 percent of Cypriots would like EU aid for this, even slightly higher than the EU average. ‘In a country which is still suffering from an invasion very similar to Ukraine’s *(the Turkish invasion of 1974, ed.)*, these are not very complimentary observations. They confirm the available circumstantial evidence which implies that the Cypriots are happy to sell their homeland for a bit of money. Certainly, not a very complimentary conclusion!’

Speaking on the phone from the capital Nicosia, Panayiotides says the relationship between Russia and Cyprus is 'pretty straightforward'. Already in the early 1990s, at the fall of communism, Russian businessmen set up constructions in Cyprus that allowed them to trade internationally at advantageous rates, 'amassing considerable wealth beyond the reach of those in power in Moscow', the columnist tells De Standaard.

'That situation has changed somewhat over time, but many Cypriots - lawyers, accountants, bankers and construction promoters, and all their staff, have benefited significantly over the years.' Cypriot openness to the Russians also boosted Russian tourism to Cyprus. 'Add hotel owners and restaurateurs and many others to the group of Cypriots who were happy to welcome the Russians. It is as simple as that,' says Panayiotides.

**‘Of course, this is Cyprus!’**

Over time, the number of Russians settling in Cyprus grew, which is possible if they find work here or marry locally. The vast majority of those Russians with 'ordinary' jobs, from hotel and shop staff to digital nomads, rarely make the news. That’s different for the super-rich Russians who received so-called 'golden passports'.

Plagued by a severe banking crisis, Cyprus introduced a new rule in 2013: anyone who invested around two million euros directly in the country - the purchase of a very expensive house or flat would do, or company shares - was not only registered as a legal resident of Cyprus, but also entered a fast-track procedure that led directly to Cypriot nationality within six months to two years.

Since Cyprus has been an EU member since 2004, such a Cypriot passport immediately guarantees free movement (and trade) throughout the European Union. In Brussels there has been long-standing resentment towards these 'golden passports' of Cyprus and Malta, among others. Protests against them gained momentum when the Arabic news channel Al Jazeera broadcast an undercover report in 2020.

Two fictitious representatives of a fictitious Chinese millionaire, with a criminal record, went for a Cypriot passport in front of the hidden Jazeera cameras. They soon found help in high circles, from lawyers, businessmen, a member of parliament, and even the then speaker of parliament. When asked if a Chinese businessman with a criminal record could get a Cypriot passport - officially this went against the rules - a well-known Cypriot lawyer replied: 'Of course, this is Cyprus!’ The phrase has since become a standard joke among Cypriots.

Through the introduction of the golden passports, Cyprus reportedly amassed some seven billion euros since 2013. Among the 2,500 names on golden passports that Al Jazeera gathered through a data leak, there were about a thousand Russians. Their money did not go to the Cypriot treasury, but largely to the property sellers, lawyers, bankers and possibly others involved who 'facilitated' the procedure. ‘Pretty straightforward', as columnist Panayiotides described the general situation.

After much ado about the Al Jazeera report, Cyprus put the golden passports on hold. The European Commission started an infringement procedure; in fact, the system should be doomed to be abolished completely. Now, the invasion of Ukraine and the Union's economic sanctions against Russian companies and businessmen are making the issue even more pressing.

‘Countries still decide for themselves who gets their nationality. In the case of an EU member state, it does have consequences for the entire Union,' says expert Maíra Martini of the international corruption watchdog Transparency International, on the phone from Berlin. ‘In Cyprus there appear to be very few checks on the antecedents of those who apply for a golden passport. Nor does Cyprus disclose the list of names of the holders of such passports. In most cases we do not have the impression that those people have actually moved to Cyprus, either. They buy a property and are gone again - with their brand new EU passport.'

With the invasion of Ukraine, Martini now sees a 'more active political debate' about this issue, although much more progress is needed. 'Where do these people go now? If they go to the United Arab Emirates, Singapore or Hong Kong and there they turn a blind eye, too, the problem just moves. It would make a huge difference, though, if the European Union at least would put its own house in order.’

**A talk and a cup of tea**

Did the invasion of Ukraine end the Russian golden years in Cyprus? In Anglo-Saxon media Cyprus was often scornfully called ‘Moscow on the Med’. Now Russian companies and banks are already scaling back their presence on the island, under pressure from EU sanctions. On the promenades and beaches, too, the Russian language is audibly less spoken, because there are no more charter flights from Moscow. Tourism is nevertheless already flourishing in this June month, for the first time since 2019. This time more British, Germans, Scandinavians, Israelis and also Belgians are taking the charter flight to Cyprus.

Meanwhile, Cyprus is also pulling up its socks for Ukrainians. At the beginning of the invasion, an unprecedented humanitarian action for relief goods was set up. Despite the Eurobarometer figures, solidarity among ordinary Cypriots for Ukraine proved to be quite strong. According to the latest figures from the UN refugee agency UNHCR, the Republic of Cyprus hosts some 13,000 Ukrainian refugees - four times more than Belgium in terms of population.

For the 'ordinary Russians' living in their little paradise of Cyprus, it remains to be seen what further consequences the Ukrainian invasion by their president will bring. Some worry about their job security and thus their right of residence in Cyprus. Some prefer to remain silent and wait and see, others use their right to speak and enjoy the freedoms this EU country offers them, like the demonstrators in the old port of Limassol. Some are worried, speaking freely at the same time as feeling guilty, because they know that the situation of the Ukrainians is so much grimmer.

For our last stop in Limassol, we ring the door of the house of yet another Natalia, two Natalias in fact, plus an Anna. Russian Natalia, 40, lives with her family in a well-to-do residential suburb of Limassol. ‘When the war started, I suddenly realised that I knew a lot of Ukrainians - but I had never before asked them where they were from, because we just spoke Russian among ourselves,' says Russian Natalia. ‘My yoga teacher turned out to be from Odessa, my hairdresser from Kherson, you name it. I had no clue.'

'The first week of the invasion I was completely frustrated,' she says. 'We started collecting clothes for children, medicines, anything to make us feel less helpless whilst there is such a big crime going on. Then I saw in a Facebook group that they were looking for shelter for refugees from Ukraine. So I signed up, after discussing it with the family. It felt somewhat uncomfortable to register there, as a Russian, but of course it was pointless to conceal I’m Russian.’

Now two Ukrainian women, Natalia, 41, and Anna, 32, live with the family of Russian Natalia in Limassol. Ukrainian Natalia had to flee before, as she comes from the eastern town of Luhansk, which was taken over by 'pro-Russian separatists' back in 2014. With her son Nikita, 16, she lived for several years in the capital city Kiev, until the new war arrived there in February.

Anna lived, with her husband and two-year-old son Matvei, near Kiev’s international airport of Borispil – Anna used to work as a flight attendant until the birth of her son. Her husband stayed in Borispil, Anna and Matvei fled the violence. 'Matvei was born with a heart defect and needs surgery,' says Anna. 'The hospitals in Ukraine are busy with the wounded of the war.'

Via Poland, Natalia and Nikita, Anna and Matvei all ended up with Russian Natalia in Limassol. The women make the best of it and support each other. ‘We laugh sometimes and cry a lot, it is important to feel support', says Ukrainian Natalia. Russian hostess Natalia 'feels when we need a talk and a cup of tea, or when a glass of wine brings more comfort.'

Their stay at the home of Russian Natalia is temporary. Ukrainian Natalia is focused on her sixteen-year-old son Nikita. With the best possible education in mind, they want to move to Poland this summer, where the language barrier is smaller. Anna, in turn, has found a host family in Britain, where little Matvei can have surgery on his heart - complex heart operations are not possible in tiny Cyprus.

With a photo in mind, we walk to a nearby beach. Russian Natalia still has family in Russia; she disguises herself almost professionally with a summer hat and sunglasses. ‘I have no idea if anyone in Russia will blame me for taking in Ukrainian refugees', she says. ‘Even some in my family there are not pleased with what I am doing. At least I feel less helpless. We do the little things we can, together.’